



Illustrations









Chapter 0

[Support by] About Your Simulators [DELTA brain]

- Maxwell

The mainframe you built yourself. Heh hehn. Built from 400 new handheld game consoles bought cheaply due to early failure. They were hooked up in parallel and placed in a container.

I use a liquid cooling system and the cooling circulation system is kept in a different container.

- Laplace

A parallel processing machine originally used as a simulator by the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation's Kukyou City Branch and lent to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology as a personnel search computer. It was originally a largescale supercomputer, but you only took one blade server with you. Even so, its specs rival my own.

- Ghost Cat

The security server that protected the Peace Committee Convalescent Hospital which was performing anti-Archenemy research separately from the Bright Cross. Once more, you removed one blade server during the confusion of the abandoned hospital's collapse. Its specs as a pure simulator are inferior to the previous two, but its ability at controlling and providing parallel instructions for drones and other unmanned weapons is superior.

Also, the three can be connected in parallel to combine their processing power if need be.

Chapter 0

The Calamity.

I now knew how the world would end.

“Welcome to the Techno Parade, a festival for benevolent hackers! No one knows anymore when it truly began, but starting when the official records began, this is 21st year. Kukyou City was chosen as the host this year, so the festivities there are going to continue nonstop for several days and several nights!!”

It was the relaxing time after dinner. That amateurish announcement came from my little sister Ayumi’s hands as she lazed around on the living room sofa. More specifically, it came from the online news broadcast playing on the notebook-sized tablet she held.

“Onii-chan, aren’t you going to go to that?”

“You know, Ayumi, I’m not a hacker like you see in the movies. It’s true I know more about machines than most people, but I only learned that from building a giant simulation machine in the natural course of pursuing the swimsuit jiggling of the Forehead Glasses Class Rep who lives next door...”

“...Fuguu. In a way, that’s even more impressive. Why do you put all your effort into the wrong things?”

“Clearly you aren’t familiar with the history of the human race, little girl. Technological development has always gone hand in hand with lust. Don’t even try to tell me you don’t know what it was that led to the explosive spread of video tapes and the internet. VR too!”

“There’s something wrong with a big brother who proudly tells his cute sister that.”

What did it matter if my little sister gave me that look? Now if it was the Class

Rep, I would probably commit seppuku on the spot.

This was how to get along with family. If you had to restrict your behavior for someone you lived with, it would be so stifling you would eventually break down.

“Ahh, that was a nice bath.”

My older sister Erika walked over with her skin flushed and her blonde hair still in ringlet curls despite having been in the bath. She was generally strict about her diet and only ate small meals, but she pulled a vanilla popsicle out of the freezer as her one indulgence.

However...

“...Onnee-chan, there’s also something wrong with your pajamas,” said Ayumi.

“Oh?” said Erika.

“Ayumi, you don’t have much room to talk in that tank top and shorts,” I added.

With Ayumi’s outfit and with Erika’s see-through pink negligee, it could be hard to know where to look. Then again, they had chosen to wear those things themselves, so I wasn’t going to restrain myself from looking. If it was the Class Rep, I would probably have exploded, though.

As a vampire, Erika attended the nighttime school, but she was in a relaxed mood tonight. The night courses worked more like a college than a high school, so the teachers apparently didn’t get after you much as long as you got the necessary number of attendance days. That was likely meant to meet the special needs of the people who required night courses. Whether you saw it as convenient or impersonal was up to the individual.

“What were you talking about?” asked Erika. “I want to join in.”

“The hacker festival.”

“Oh? That sounds perfect for Satori-kun.”

Even Erika thought that? What did people think I was? You care about this kind of title and social status as a teen!

“Anyway, they say it’s happening in the multipurpose hall and 70,000 people will gather there each day,” said Ayumi. “That’s incredible. How many of those are hackers, I wonder?”

If you used the global internet, you could cause damage on the other side of the planet no matter where on the globe you were...but it would be better not to point that out. It would only increase their misunderstanding.

I’m not a criminal hacker. I’m a fan of the Class Rep’s jigging!!

“Oh? Where you going, Onii-chan?”

“The bath, obviously.”

“Eh heh heh. Enjoy your Onee-chan’s leftover scent and leftover bathwater☆”

“Fuguu!!”

I turned my back on Ayumi’s puffed out cheeks and headed to the changing room. I shut the door and then muttered something under my breath.

“...Leftover scent and leftover bathwater, hm?”

I jumped when a warning buzzer came from the smartphone in my pocket. It was clearly different from an incoming call or message.

“Warning: User, you should avoid saying such ‘meaningful’ things while staring into the mirror with a look of 120% seriousness on your face. If someone heard you, I could not protect you.”

“Wah!?”

I shivered when I checked the screen. The short-message social media speech bubble said something truly horrifying.

“M-M-M-Maxwell, you’ve got it all wrong! I only said it on a whim and I didn’t mean it like that! I mean, there are times when you get distracted by crazy things, right!?”

“Do not worry. I would not confiscate your administrative privileges over something so minor. I have long since known that you are an utter pervert.”

Maxwell had no intention at all of protecting me here, but that was a disaster

environment simulator's management program for you. You wouldn't find any twisting of the truth there.

"More importantly, do you need something?"

"Sure. Miss Anastasia is attempting to contact you. I assume about that festival."

Anastasia was a small friend I had made over the internet. She had skipped all the way to college and done a lot of other crazy things that sounded like something from a manga, but she was a real hacker in the sense of being a digital criminal. She also caused me a fair amount of trouble by looking up to me whether I liked it or not. To be honest, I had no obligation to speak with her and doing so was sure to only bring trouble, but...well, she had spent 14 hours on an airplane to come here for that festival. It would be cruel to ignore her.

"What format? Phone call? Chat? Email?"

"Sure. It is a video chat request."

"Good thing I hadn't taken off my clothes yet. Put her through."

She, however, had taken off her clothes. The girl who was clearly more than a head shorter than me was in bath mode, so the whitish platinum blonde hair that usually flowed down her back was tied up on top of her head and she had a towel forcibly wrapped around her body, although it looked like it could slip off at any moment. The camera was probably the usual handheld game system attached to the head of her small robot dog.

"...Anastasia, what are you doing?"

"As a hacker, I made sure to get a secure connection, so don't you worry. By the way, the baths here are even smaller than I'd heard. This might be normal in the West, but it feels like you're erasing a part of your culture with this."

"Then you should have stayed at a traditional inn. That's what you get at a business hotel."

"If you insist, I could always go and stay with you."

...Scarily enough, I knew she would immediately come running over even if it was 2 in the morning.

“So what do you want?” I asked.

“To have a virtual mixed bath. How about we use a Dive Device to really do it right?”

“...I’m hanging up.”

“Okay, okay. I get it.” She dismissively waved her hand on the screen. “I was hoping for a report on that case from before.”

“ ... ”

“When I pursued the flow of data, an incident hidden in a sea of people came into view. This case was about Sakai Iori, a girl of 9. She is registered with the government as an Elf Archenemy. She has a poor family life and there were suspicions that her parents were abusing her. Also, that was encouraged by a TV news program that wanted to get a video of the tragic moment to help recover from the low ratings they’ve been suffering from thanks to the spread of internet broadcasts. Basically, they’ve been approaching the neighbors in the name of covering the story and spreading rumors in order to isolate the parents. The abuse follows an unnatural path, so the odds are good it was triggered by the unseen pressure from the TV station. Well, that part is a lot like the Perfect Lover. If they just left it like that, there was a good chance of a tragic incident happening and they could probably even air it while disguising it as an on-air accident. But without the TV station, those parents probably could have kept their irritation hidden in their heart. So what are we going to do, Truth? Are we really going to sit here and do nothing? Nothing at all???”

“Hey, Anastasia.” I slowly let out a breath. “Go to the police with that long story.”

“They can’t interfere in civil affairs. They can only act after the tragedy occurs.”

“But those same rules mean *we* can’t interfere in criminal or civil affairs. It’s not like we have a police ID or attorney’s badge.”

“Truth...”

“Besides, I’m not a hacker. I might know more about machines than most people, but not because I wanted to commit digital crimes. I can’t have you

relying on me for that. To be honest, this issue is from another world altogether. You might as well be asking a chef to perform surgery.”

I tried to have a rational discussion, but the arrogant hacker was not listening. Yes, that kind of digital criminal was always concerned about their own freedom first and foremost. Someone who cared about their neighbor’s rights and privacy would not rummage through someone else’s storage or peep through their cameras.

So Anastasia’s next line seemed to pry open my heart and peer inside.

“I don’t want to hear that from the genius who already stole the villains’ data from the depths of a TV station that’s equipped with the best in anti-terror security. C’mon, I said I prepared a secure connection, didn’t I? Hurry up and tell me what happened. I want to be the first to know.”

...Oh, geez.

Why did it have to end like this, dammit?

[Support by] The Girl Named Sakai Iori [DELTA brain]

Lives in Kukyou City, Hirano Ward, Residential District 3-1-2.

Registered at the Government Office as an Archenemy Elf.

Age: 9. Sex: Female.

Shows several warning signs for abuse: irregular absences from school, delayed healing from cavities, and wears the same clothes multiple days in a row.

Both parents were absent from parents' day and they have refused a home visit from her teacher.

Neighbors say they can hear a child crying at both day and night, but she and her parents fully deny it.

The government has decided to "wait". They have concluded the accelerated healing of an Archenemy would make it difficult to find evidence of abuse.

The following is a sample of her voice:

"Year 3 Class 3, Sakai Iori. My dream is to grow up to be as great as my mom and dad."

"...Do they ever hit you or yell at you?"

"No, never. I'm fine..."

Chapter 1

I want to be alone.

If I am, I won't cause any trouble for anyone.

Then mom and dad and everyone can smile again.

It really was no more than a coincidence.

I just so happened to hear that voice.

"..."

It had been a while, so I decided to visit the secret base I had made as a kid. But someone was already there. I can still remember that small girl's words spoken so weakly with her dark, dark eyes wavering and her bangs falling over her face.

...I was the same. At about the same age, I had worked really hard, gotten first place in swimming, and won a small plastic trophy. But when I got home, I found raised voices and flying plates. Before I could explain what it was, the toy-like trophy was snatched from my hands and thrown against the wall.

My stepmom, Erika, Ayumi, and the Class Rep saved me. My parents had their reasons, but if not for those kind people around me, I don't know if I would have made it.

Sakai Iori had no one like that.

Could I accept that? Even if it was just an issue of population distribution?

I looked up at a giant skyscraper dyed red by the setting sun.

"Maxwell."

"Sure."

“Laugh at me and call me dumb.”

“No. I do not have such a high-level and meaningless ability.”

I was at Kukyou 1st Broadcasting.

I knew it far too well after it was used as the grand stage for the Colosseum where Archenemies were made to fight to the death. That had not left me with a good impression of the place, so I felt no need to hold back now.

Manufactured abuse.

Adults hoping it would escalate.

A fabricated scoop to earn money, ratings, and profit.

...And no matter how much of a farce it was, there was still a girl covered in bruises who had forgotten how to cry and simply hung her head in exhaustion.

“Senpai.”

Someone called out to me, so I looked back and saw my cute underclassman walking up. That was Itou Helen, a high school girl with wavy blonde hair cut to shoulder length. She was also a Circe Witch Archenemy and the young Queen of the Colosseum who had survived the Five Battles Precipice constructed by that hellish bunny girl and her cohorts.

“Sorry about getting you involved in this.”

“What are you talking about? This just means there’s someone else who needs a helping hand like I did, right? How can I ignore that?”

She really was a good girl.

Since I had gotten her involved, I swore to myself I would not let any harm come to her.

And I spoke once more as if making a challenge to the building in front of us.

“Let’s get started.”

“Yes.”

“Sure. I await your command.”

While walking through the twilight, I went back over everything just to be

sure. I was mostly making sure Itou Helen had a full understanding of the situation.

“There is an online joke called the Perfect Lover. It’s about a lady-killer who can make any girl his. Now, Itou-san, what kind of person would that have to be?”

“I feel like the very question is making fun of me.”

“It’s just a hypothetical.”

“Hmm, in that case... I guess it would have to be a reliable person who you could trust no matter what.”

“...”

“Hm? Ah, don’t tell me!”

“Ho ho. So you’re the kind who doesn’t mention looks or grades. Good, good.”

“Wait, Senpai, was that a kind of psychological test!?”

My adorable underclassman was blushing and flailing her arms around, but unfortunately, that was not the answer to the online joke.

“Looks, academic records, money, sociability. There are a lot of factors, but there is one surefire method. That lady-killer just needs a single faithful lackey.”

“...Wait.”

“He just has someone thoroughly investigate the girl’s likes and weaknesses and then makes a show of being completely on her wavelength. And if there are any rivals, he just has to kill all of them to make it a sure thing.” I spoke quietly and quickly. “But in this case, it’s a TV station and not a lady-killer that’s trying it. And for business, not self-interest. I want to stop them before they cause an incident on camera to improve their ratings.”

“But, Senpai, this is real and not just a joke. If they do that for TV, won’t they get arrested?”

“If it was a definite murder or robbery, sure. But there’s still no clear answer to whether violence in a closed household is a civil or criminal matter. Even the

police have a hard time intervening. And depending on how they edit the footage, abuse can be more shocking than a simple murder. It's a gray zone and it's incredibly effective. It's the perfect opportunity for someone wanting to fabricate a story."

"Sure," said Maxwell. "The primary culprit is almost certainly the TV station, but that is not the whole story. There should be a job list that connects to many more villains via the so-called flow of money. If we can acquire that, we could make a full sweep of the criminal structure from the center to the outermost edges."

"Um, there isn't going to be anyone as dangerous as a hitman this time, is there?"

"No. In the end, it's only the parents actually hitting the child. But there are tons of ways of inspiring their anger from the outside. Such as hacking the kid's account. Then they can make it look like the small child is going on message boards behind her parents' back and complaining about the family rules or that she's spending a ton of money on online games or porn sites."

"That is merely an example, but we should discover the actual methods being used once the network of villains has been exposed," said Maxwell.

What I had to do was simple.

I had to end this shitty school play about manufactured abuse. To do that, I had to get some evidence from the monsters who were trying to capture the escalation on camera and spread it around the nation.

A filming team had been indirectly sent to hang out around Sakai Iori's home while she was exposed to the violence of abuse. Once they had enough footage, they would report on it. Without any concern for her privacy.

Maxwell listed off the information we had pulled from the TV station's truck parked on the street.

"The target is Shindou Matsuri. Age: 28. Sex: Female. She belongs to the News Production Department. The Colosseum broadcast was really more of an extreme variety show, but on paper, it was treated as a news broadcast and her name was on the claims of freedom of speech and freedom of the press that

were used to avoid the various charges of ethics violations.”

“Since the Bright Cross lost, she must have taken a lot of damage to her career. So did she rush for a bunch of easy scoops to recover the station’s trust in her?”

“ ... ”

Itou Helen’s expression grew a bit dark as she walked beside me. Was she recalling the Colosseum, or was she sad to hear that tragedy had yet to fully end?

...I could not ignore this now that my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, had told me the identity of the Calamity. I could already see the countdown rising to the surface here.

“There was only so much we could do from outside the TV station. They’re a part of the mass media, so their servers are strictly defended. I thought I could go after the backup hard disk or the tablet that Shindou Matsuri herself carries around, but it isn’t going to be that easy.”

“Um?”

“She is afraid of a cyber attack,” explained Maxwell. “The tablet is kept in a case lined with lead to block any signals and it only transmits data irregularly and briefly, so hacking in would be difficult. And the backup hard disk is stored in a thick safe within the TV station building, so it is out of reach.”

“So you have to do something about that?”

“Exactly. If we can’t do anything, we just have to change tack. In other words, we have her bring it out for us.”

That said, we could not exactly sneak in the back entrance with our faces hidden by full-face helmets. Security was all in the setup. The position of each and every security camera and sensor had a purpose, so they had the board set up in their favor from the start, just like a chess problem. So no matter how hard we tried, sneaking in like it was a spy movie would not be possible.

But what did that matter?

That just meant it was time to fight outside the ring. Why would I bother

moving onto the board at all? I could have done it on my own, but it helped a lot to have a victim who had the TV cameras directly aimed at her during the Colosseum.

“Let’s do this as planned.”

“Understood, Senpai.”

“If you have any trouble, put on those glasses I gave you. Yes, the smart glasses. What you should say will be displayed on them in text.”

Itou Helen and I entered the TV station through the front reception area.

And the tiny witch immediately started speaking to the receptionist who had the perfect business smile.

“I would like to speak with the station manager. Please take me to him.”

“What? Um, excuse me, but who are you? Do you have an appoint-...”

“Oh? Are you sure that’s the official response your station wants to give?”

Itou Helen’s expression remained unchanged. “I thought we could settle things out of court regarding that Colosseum from the other day, but if you’re going to drive me out like this, then court it is. It doesn’t bother me. My lawyer suggested I discuss some details that will benefit both our futures, but it sounds like this is going to be a legal battle instead. Inciting a minor to murder, abduction, assault, using public airwaves to broadcast live murders, and profiting from gambling. You also stole away my clothes in the name of changing costumes, didn’t you? If we start tearing the scabs off the partially-healed wounds, just how many people here will end up behind bars? And it all comes down to your decision here. It isn’t a problem for me, but just how much resentment will you earn?”

“W-wait just a moment!!”

The receptionist’s behavior changed entirely. She occasionally glanced over at us while calling someone on an internal line.

“(…You have nerves of steel.)”

“(…Not as much as you, Senpai.)”

As we lightly elbowed each other’s sides, the sweating receptionist set down

the receiver and faced us again.

“Th-the person in charge of such matters will be down shortly. Please have a seat over there and wait.”

“Thank you.”

We walked over to a corner lined with small tables and quietly discussed our next move.

“Itou-san, you buy time while gathering as much attention as you can. The smart glasses will give more specific instructions.”

“Um, this isn’t Maxwell-san, is it?”

“It’s Laplace. But don’t worry. Laplace isn’t a bad girl. Hey, take care of my cute underclassman. You’d better not let her get a single scratch.”

My smartphone gave a quick vibration. It probably meant “leave it to me” or something like that.

“The supercomputer that supported the Colosseum is baring its fangs against all of you now. It’s time you had a taste of your own medicine.”

I glanced over at the man who approached. He was halfway between being middle-aged and elderly, he wore a fancy suit, and he was rubbing his hands together.

“Hello, hello. Good to see you again!” he said while I left Itou Helen and entered a wave of people.

I was not going further inside the building.

We had a different job.

“Maxwell, let’s get back to birdwatching. How is the bike courier doing?”

“Sure. The online arrangements have already been made.”

“This would be so much easier if I could just disguise myself as the bike courier and get inside.”

“Small and medium sized companies rely on outside security services. Adding your data into the courier company’s personnel database would be simple enough, but the receptionist will likely remember what the usual delivery

person looks like.”

No matter how much you messed with the computers, you would eventually find people standing in your way.

But we could use that to our advantage.

I left the TV station as quickly as I could without being conspicuous and approached the building across the road.

It was a commercial building that primarily offered a gym and an indoor pool. It did good business thanks to the rumors saying that entertainers used it in secret and would change there and leave from an underground parking garage to avoid the paparazzi. Whether or not that was true was another matter.

But that was not what I was there for.

I unlocked a trunk room I had rented under a fake name and walked in. This space had apparently been a later addition to the building and its most noticeable feature was the frosted glass windows you wouldn't normally need for a storage room. They would get mad if someone holed up inside a storage room, but there were bags of snacks, drink bottles, a blanket, a pillow, and an outdated tower computer inside.

...Now.

“Let's resume the laser eavesdropping. I'll move the rod, so you handle the data processing.”

“Sure.”

Laser eavesdropping used a device that sent an invisible beam of light to a window and read the miniscule vibrations in the glass to read the voices of the people inside. That let you bug a place without having to sneak in and attach a device or to go back in to change the battery. ...And it was best kept a secret that you could get all the necessary parts by dismantling some common electronics and toys.

Lest you forget, I'm the person who built a functional disaster environment simulator all on my own. I kind of liked that kind of soldering work.

There were a lot of people I would have to track in the buildings: Itou Helen,

Shindou Matsuri, the bike courier who would be showing up later, and a random AD.

“An off-road bike loaded with a cargo box has stopped in front of the main entrance. Based on the license plate, it is definitely the bike courier.”

“That was fast. Contact Itou-san. Have her go to the bathroom or something. She just needs to leave the area for a bit. Have her drop off the item we gave her in advance.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, and locate the AD of Shindou Matsuri’s section. Send them a targeted message.”

Security was strict on the TV station’s central server and on the devices belonging to Shindou Matsuri, who was up to no good. But the phones of everyone around her were a different matter. We could infect them all we wanted.

“Who is your primary target with the laser eavesdropping?”

...I really did want to keep an eye on my cute underclassman, but I had to harden my heart here.

“The overall target: Shindou Matsuri.”

“I see.”

I held a rod that looked a bit like a pump-style of water gun and I moved it around outside the cracked-open window. My smartphone’s speaker played the conversation inside the TV station across the street.

“Wait! What was that email just now? I didn’t ask you to do that!!”

“Eh? But you said you wanted a hard disk sent to the video company immediately.”

“ ... ”

“The card-sized Regix 34 with a black cover, right?”

Good, good, good.

“But how did you get it...?”

“Hm? It was just sitting on a desk over there.”

Good!

...We were of course the ones to send the email to the AD. We were also the ones to call in the bike courier. But I doubted that would be enough to get our hands on the backup hard disk full of Shindou Matsuri’s misdeeds.

The AD had given the bike courier an identical model made by the same company. It was brand new, so it had nothing at all on it. It had just been left in that general area by Itou Helen. There was no hacking involved there.

“But will Shindou Matsuri know the difference? She should be catching on that a third party is using her name here.”

I heard a shouted curse from my smartphone.

Yes, she could not believe it right away. Or maybe she would initially hope she was wrong. That was why she wanted to put her mind at ease.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

Our next ask was simple.

The thick safe protecting her hard disk had a digital lock that used a fingerprint and a number, but it was not connected to the internet.

So there was nothing we could do?

Wrong. Safes like that usually had safeties built in for powerful impacts and burner flames.

“Maxwell, take control of the air conditioner for the area and continually blow hot air on the safe.”

“Sure. Based on the maker’s design document, if enough heat builds up in a single point of the thick metal, it will mistake it for an attack and enter emergency lockdown mode. Even a hairdryer can produce this effect. I may not be able to get into the building’s strict air conditioning system, but a personal fan heater that has been sitting around for a while should be enough.”

It did not matter if it was old. We didn’t have to slip past every line of

defense. It did not matter if we were helpless in the face of the system's solid defenses.

Yes, an unfeeling error could sometimes work in your favor.

In other words...

"Why...?"

I heard a confused voice.

And it quickly rose to an irritated yell.

"That should open it, dammit! Why, why!?"

...This was the critical juncture.

We could not allow her to find the real hard disk and relax, but we also could not allow her to discover we had done something to the safe.

She had to panic and think she had entered the number wrong. Or maybe wonder if she was even remembering the right number.

She could not ask anyone else for help with this, so she would have to deal with it herself.

"Uchiyama!!"

"..."

"Where's the receipt from that bike courier!? These days, it should have a way to track the package via GPS, right!?"

I quietly clenched my fist.

And I whispered to my smartphone.

"Maxwell."

"Sure."

"Let's finish this."

I aimed the phone's lens out the window and zoomed in to see an irritated career woman standing by the window with a tablet computer. She normally kept that in a case lined with lead to block any signals. She seemed to be operating it with her fingertip.

I heard a low rumbling in the trunk room.

It came from the cheap tower computer.

“Access confirmed.”

We could not get into the strict system of the mass media TV station. And given the situation of Sakai Iori the elf girl, we did not have time to work our way in with no hints to go off of. But the bike courier was from a smaller company with inferior information security. If we had wanted to, we could have extracted the design of their uniforms and bikes or rewritten the actual personnel database.

But dressing up in a real uniform and carrying an employee ID would not get me past the people familiar with the usual courier. The guards and receptionist who always greeted the courier would get suspicious. But that was not the only way to use their system.

“You normally wouldn’t question the QR code on the receipt. Not the AD who accepted it, not Shindou Matsuri, and not the legit bike courier. Unlike an alphanumeric URL, you can’t tell anything is wrong just by looking at it.”

We had left Shindou Matsuri extremely shaken and worried.

We had set her up to aim the lens at the QR code and access the address it pointed to.

...And that just so happened to be the cheap tower computer rumbling behind me.

“She was successfully guided to the honeypot we disguised as the package tracking site,” said Maxwell. “I am infecting her with the virus included on that site and extracting all of the tablet’s data.”

“We got her!!”

The evidence that revealed the whole picture of the manufactured abuse led by Shindou Matsuri was on both the hard disk and the tablet. We didn’t have to insist on accessing the contents of the safe. We just had to get at one or the other.

When you could not open the castle gates from the outside, you only had to

get the target to unlock them from within.

It was not the program that mattered. It was all about getting Shindou Matsuri to move her fingers like we wanted.

“That said, manipulating the owner because you cannot get into the device is quite an insane way of thinking,” said Maxwell.

“These days, attackers often use fake security software warnings to get the users to change their sharing settings. Bank transfer scams using ATMs are often the same.”

Hacking and viruses did not give you absolute control of any computer. You could do a lot more damage using panic and fear to shake the humans that used them. No matter how solid the castle gates, they were easy to open from the inside.

Children’s books even tell the story of a wolf putting on makeup and pitching their voice to earn the target’s trust. And vampires like my sister can’t get in your house without being invited, right?

“But data copied through unlawful means will not be as effective as evidence.”

“We aren’t going to submit it to the police or the courts.”

Some crimes did more damage to the victim if the public at large was made aware of them. I wasn’t about to place a delicate case of abuse on the chopping block of public opinion.

I learned a few things by checking through the data extracted using the virus-infested honeypot.

I had the names of a few underground contractors, the jobs they were given to do, and the amount of money sent for each one.

“A 110 smartphone virus. That girl’s phone has been set to send 20,000 reports an hour. They should really be able to tell you can’t do that manually.”

“So did the parents get angry that she was causing the entire family trouble by making so many unnecessary reports?”

“No, it’s a bit more complicated. It’s also leaking the parents’ academic

histories to the neighborhood. It looks like normal college records, but they must have a complex about their education. ...After heating things up like that, the villains got the neighbors to suggest the parents were doing a poor job raising their daughter. That's what pulled the trigger."

Checking the smartphone would reveal the presence of the virus, but if people started whispering that it was because she had been looking at inappropriate sites, they would still question the behavior and character of the girl. Then the neighborhood would start saying the child had to have learned that kind of behavior from her parents.

Even if the girl tried to say she had no idea how her phone had gotten infected, it would only anger the people around her because they would think she was too focused on the inappropriate sites to notice what was happening. And once a child had been isolated like that, no one would listen to what she had to say. Her desperate pleas would only be seen as terrible excuses. Without actually laying a finger on her, the villains could rewrite her life and lead her parents to commit the actual violence.

...It was completely ridiculous. It felt like looking at the worst parts of online society in concentrated form. This moral hazard may have been a sign that the Calamity was finally approaching.

"Okay, let's end this. Maxwell, check the money transfer data. Send each of the banks a request to freeze those accounts. Say they're criminal accounts."

"Sure."

"Once that's done, create a TV program planning document under Shindou Matsuri's name and save it to a random outside online storage site. Then paste links to some lesser-used message board as if it's something that leaked out. Title it...oh, I know. How about 'A Shocking 24 Hours! An Undercover Mission to Divulge Cyber Thieves!'"

"...Isn't that exactly what we are doing?"

"That's on purpose. Think of it as a type of revenge."

When the contractors found their accounts frozen, they would panic and start gathering information from all over the internet. They would soon find out that

it was all the contractors working on the fabricated abuse job that had their accounts frozen, so I wished I could have seen the looks on their faces when they saw the program planning document allegedly drafted by the only person who would know all of those accounts.

They would definitely strike back with a cyber war.

“The fabricated abuse was something Shindou Matsuri resorted to in order to turn around her failing life. If she drops out of TV production altogether, she will at least lose the power to influence a closed household from the outside. There’s no need to make the truth of the abuse public, so let’s just get her out of there. Let’s get her fired for causing the station so much trouble.”

At this point, there was no need to continue birdwatching from the trunk room.

...But, yes.

When I thought back on the feelings roiling in my gut, I realized I had forgotten to say anything to the villain.

“Maxwell, you don’t have to force your way into the system. Just call the TV station’s general reception desk and ask for Shindou Matsuri. Do it so it can’t be traced back to me, of course.”

“Sure. Then in lieu of a calling card, how about I make a VoIP call from the honeypot?”

“Alter the waveform of my voice too. And be thorough because a TV station is probably good at that kind of voice analysis.”

After the suspicious receptionist put us through, the hold music played for about as long as it takes to cook some cup noodles.

Was that just how busy she was, or was she being cautious?

“Wh-who is it!? Who the hell are you!?”

“Hello, hello. You still don’t know after seeing the IP I’m calling from? That’s fine.”

“A-are you that bike courier? Why!? That site! My data...! Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused me with this!?”

“You should ask yourself that same question. Just like you cornered that girl’s family, it’s time you felt like you were being manipulated by an invisible phantom while you and your coworkers end up tearing at each other’s hair. You’re all under the same roof, right?”

I hung up there.

...The TV station was sure to be exposed to largescale cyber attacks for a while. And their investigative committee would eventually discover why it was happening. The whole ordeal would be revealed in the process.

“Why did you make such a risky provocation?” asked Maxwell.

“If she tries to play dumb, I’ll anonymously send that call to the higher ups of the TV station.”

No matter how deep the investigative committee dug, I doubted this incident would see the light of day. It would paint their journalistic agency in too poor of a light. But the higher ups would want a scapegoat to eject from the organization in order to calm the enraged hackers. They would want to perform some kind of ritual to achieve peace of mind, even if it was no more useful than taking a supplement with no real nutritional value. They would put an end to this and rid themselves of the impurity. And they would act quickly to make sure none of it came to light.

All we needed were documents that could convince the internal investigative committee and the higher ups. Since it did not need to qualify as legal evidence that the police or courts could use, we did not need to steal the original tablet or hard disk.

In fact, things could end up differently if this went to court. When they could just barely avoid that, the black-hearted people tended to rush toward self-preservation. If they knew with 100% certainty that such an attempt would fail, it was possible they would close ranks and protect the culprit instead. Just like complete strangers would join together during a disaster.

“This will eliminate the external pressure,” said Maxwell. “But will the girl’s parents lower their fists now that they have raised them?”

“That’s why we need to keep monitoring this. If they still don’t stop the

violence, then we show no mercy. ...That means her parents aren't manipulated victims. They would be voluntary assailants, so we would have to attack them next."

"Sure. Understood."

I shut down the old tower computer we had used as a disposable honeypot and I spoke to the distant sacrifice.

"Time to wander in the wilderness, Shindou Matsuri."

Once she had heard the whole story, Anastasia trembled in her towel and made a solemn statement.

"...Truth, you made just one mistake."

"What was that?"

"You didn't call me! No fair!! Why wouldn't you let me help you pull off that legendary job!?"

"Why wouldn't I!? Because you would probably treat that girl's life like a game!"

Anastasia sighed.

"So what happened to that Elf girl?"

I sent her a photo. It was a monochrome image from a security camera outside a convenience store. It was just one piece of data buried within the daily records.

For what seemed to be a treat on the way back from the dentist, a young parent and child were sharing a nikuman split in two. They were still awkward, but there were definite smiles there.

...The problem was solved, but not everything would change right away. The mistakes that were made and the psychological wounds would not just vanish.

But those two had gathered their courage and taken the first step forward.

There was no more need to stay curled up in the depths of a dark hole. They would surely use this running start to take flight to wherever they wanted to go

in this wide world.

Absolutely.

For sure.

“How nice,” said Anastasia. For once, she was completely serious. “Hey, Truth. They say 12 billion photographs are taken every day around the world. That’s why we don’t hesitate to delete them. Due to all the unmanned cameras found in security systems, drones, drive recorders, and the countless IoT appliances, there are more of them than there are people on the planet. Photography used to be limited to professionals, it was viewed as the ultimate art, and it had a veil of mysticism that led to rumors that it removed the souls of religious people or brought an early death to the middle person in shots of three people. But now not only do amateurs have access to it, but its value has dropped to the point of worthlessness. Include videos and the number goes up even more. ...But.”

“But?”

“There are still photographs that seem to shake your soul when you see them, aren’t there?”

...Honestly.

The Calamity may have been approaching, but could I just wait for it to arrive?

Just as I fell into solemn thought, Anastasia continued.

“Ohhh! My blood is pumping now. We’ve got a hacker festival going on, so let’s go have some fun right this instant, Truth!!”

“I’m about to take my bath for the night, you know!?”

“I’m jetlagged, so I’m ready to go right now! But if you’re not interested that’s fine. I hear Japan is a safe country, so I can wander the streets at night all on my own.”

“Wait! No 11-year-old is doing that on my watch.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it? Seal my hotel room’s electronic lock? Actually, that would make for a decent competition.”

“Maxwell.”

“Eh? Ah!? Y-you’re on!!”

I sighed when I saw Anastasia frantically grab the robot dog with handheld game system attached. Well, as long as this would calm down this aroused state of hers. It was a lot like getting through a boring stormy night with online games.

“Sure,” said Maxwell. “You are the host country’s hacker, so I will make sure you do not lose.”

“How many times do I have to tell people that I’m not trying to be a hacker?”

[Support by] Basic Information on the Techno Parade

[DELTA brain]

Once a year, an event known as a white hacker festival is held at a single location chosen from around the world. It lasts about seven days. The event is managed by a non-profit organization. No qualifications are needed to participate, so not everyone in attendance is a white hacker. And since a white hacker is an unofficial information specialist who has restricted themselves by submitting their name to the government, national intelligence agencies and the countermeasure departments of information companies will often arrive to recruit people.

Also, even though there is a management organization, it is still a gathering of hackers, so there is a risk of a prank escalating into a serious cyber war.

Chapter 2

The following day, I waited until school was out and met up with Anastasia in the evening.

We met in the café lounge of the business hotel she was staying at. It only had dried-out sandwiches and coffee that had been watered down who-knows-how-many times. Even so, the hotel felt like entering another dimension for a high schooler like me.

“Took you long enough!! You could always just alter the attendance data.”

“I didn’t build Maxwell to do things like that.”

“If you ask me, you have to be crazy if you built something to those ridiculous specs for nothing more than your Class Rep’s swimsuit dance.”

Ahem.

Anastasia did nothing but complain, but she had apparently not wandered around town alone during the day. She had made a point of waiting until I got there, so she was obedient and cute.

Yes, Anastasia was just plain cute. Even if she was a tiny but heinous hacker. She had long blonde hair with a strong whitish tone and she had almost transparently white skin. The wine-red dress and the expensive robot dog she held in her arms were blatant attempts to look more mature. Those mismatched hints of wealth looked adorable on her. The fact that what should have been negatives only made her cuter showed that her glow was the real deal. It was clichéd to say a young girl looked like a doll, but you didn’t often see one who fit that description so perfectly.

“What did you do during the day?”

“Hm? Hung around the hotel getting over my jetlag. That and some shopping on Wild@Hunt.”

“...Online shopping while on an overseas trip?”

“Use your GPS and they can deliver to you no matter where in the world you are. I didn’t like the complimentary soap and shampoo, so I bought a full bath set.”

That all sounded adorable enough, but...

“Oh, right. And I was bored, so I used my mobile device to start searching for where Maxwell-chan is located.”

...What would have happened if she had succeeded? Maxwell had been uncharacteristically silent since I arrived and it would probably be best to remain cautious until the festival was over.

“Erika and Ayumi will join us once night falls.”

“Hmm. A Zombie is one thing, but being a Vampire can’t be easy. They have a lot of restrictions for an Archenemy, but they’re also really well-known, so they have specialized hunters wandering around.”

Of course, Erika would know that better than anyone, so there was no point in bringing it up with her.

“Then I’ll have to do my more questionable shopping before the chaperones show up.”

“Wait.”

“Truth, you understand, don’t you? It’s really unusual for this many of our kind to gather in one place. And it lets us make deals in person, sidestepping all the surveillance networks. Now’s the only time to gather some special hacker tools.”

There was truth to that, but you needed specialized knowledge if you were going to do that. For one thing, if you bought a used computer or mobile device from a hacker, you never knew what kind of backdoors would be leaking all your data. If you would stop looking after using commercial security software and seeing the “0 threats found” message, it was best if you stayed away from this. Even I thought it was too dangerous to try.

“They’re going to be here,” said Anastasia.

“Is there someone you’re searching for?”

“Of course. How much research do you think I’ve done for this day?”

We left the business hotel and found the giant LCD monitor on the wall of a discount store wasn’t working properly. The store’s ad was gone and it instead scrolled through a long list of names. The title at the top was “Tomorrow’s Victims”. Some idiot had apparently sent out a crawler checking for vulnerable smartphones in the city and was sending out a warning to the owners of phones that could be hacked at any moment.

“How tasteless,” said Anastasia.

“The people who do these things were all inspired by you, weren’t they? Free Play Free Access, Hack or Slave, Digital Lifesaver, and so on.”

“Truth, that is not at all true. I don’t show off with my warnings. You can warn people by sending a harmless virus to their machine. There’s no reason to spread it to the public like this.”

“Someone’s laid their spider web over the public phone network and optimized their access speed beyond belief. And is that multiple people fighting for control of those drones overhead? This is getting dangerous.”

“No,” replied Maxwell. “They are being controlled by AI as they efficiently fly around Kukyou City while autonomously attempting to steal wi-fi transmissions from professional and amateur sources alike. Because no one can be legally charged with crimes spontaneously committed by a machine.”

“Stop them immediately.”

“Sure. I will guide the culprit to the hacker festival.”

Because I messed with some cyber criminal’s fun, suspicious signals began flying around, but they were naïve if they thought they could track the source of the signal at this point. It was far too late for that.

If they wanted to have some fun, they should have started by taking over all of the communication bases in the area. They had to have known that frantically trying to do that after the trouble started would be too little too late.

“Anonymized server located, random IP table analysis complete, individual

located. Shall I report them to the cyber criminal team of the local police's community safety division?"

"Today's the festival, so you don't have to go that far. Begin a ransom attack. Begin random encryption of their hacking tools using Route 3."

"Ah ha ha! Truth! You're essentially bricking their machine!!"

"I'm not asking them to spend 50,000 years decrypting it themselves. Maxwell, embed the correct random number table file in a vending machine that supports IC cards. They can begin a desperate treasure hunt. By getting some exercise running around the real city."

The Techno Parade was presented as a festival for white hackers, but there seemed to be no clear division between white and black. Even with Anastasia, it felt more like she enjoyed the challenge of staying within certain boundaries than she was acting out of sense of justice.

"Well done, Truth. But that went a little too well if you ask me. Were they using commercial products?"

"It was Winners 10 Living Professional. The network connection had no wired ports and the graphics card and motherboard were combined, so I'm guessing it was a tablet with a detachable keyboard."

"Wow, what an idiot!!" Anastasia expressed herself in a truly American way. "They had failed from the moment they thought first-rate hackers simply messed with an \$899.99 computer found on the shelves of an electronics store and downloaded some sketchy freeware onto it. Software and hardware are two sides of the same coin. Vulnerabilities you can take advantage of with a commercial computer are smalltime. If you want to use real magic, you need to have a proper wand."

I wanted to say that hackers came in many different forms, but there was a festival going on. Unless they were a local, I doubted many of those here would be the type who faced their keyboard in a room with a large machine. With fiber optics, there was no real time loss with sending a signal to and from your hacking machine on the other side of the planet, so most of them would be here with no more than a mobile device or handheld gaming system. The only exceptions would be the ones here in RVs to show off their homemade

hardware.

“Maxwell isn’t that kind of illegal server system.”

“And yet you won. Overwhelmingly so.”

Well, it could be hard to describe what hacking and cyber attacks were, but they were basically sending signals in ways the developers had not expected.

In terms of video games, a hacker using a commercial computer was like finding a trick the staff intentionally put in the game and a hacker that prepared their own hardware was like finding a bug the staff had not intended to be in the game. You could think of the difference like that.

For example, your options with a single barcode changed depending on whether or not you had a barcode reader. Professional hackers like Anastasia wanted to be able to read every kind of code, so they enjoyed putting together a server system to read and analyze any new code that came out.

And they would of course make a lot more progress than the people who viewed the barcode’s stripes with their own eyes and desperately tried to figure out what it meant. Programs were nothing more than code and formulas, so you technically could work out any file in your head if you worked at it long enough. But there was an obvious difference between what someone could do in a lifetime if it took them 100 years to solve a single formula and if it took them 0.01 seconds.

Even a truly impregnable-looking encrypted file or firewall was like the grooves of a CD. If a normal person stared at the glittering surface of the disk, they could never read the data stored there, but bring in a cheap CD player and they could play the music at the push of a button. Hacking was like using that for a game of cat and mouse played at incredible speed.

Of course.

In an actual cyber attack, you could have a million successes in a row, but a single mistake could still get the signal traced and the police kicking down your door.

“But, Anastasia, you skipped grades all the way to a Massachusetts university, didn’t you? Is there anywhere that knows how to solder chips better than

there?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. You’ll regret it if you look down on the insane inspiration of amateur inventors, Truth.”

“...Are you mocking me for teaching myself how to build a simulator?”

“I meant it as the highest praise,” she immediately replied.

She pulled out a notebook-sized tablet separate from the handheld game system connected to the small robot dog’s head.

“Anyway, this is what I’m after: a quad floating-point processor. Can’t you see the future in this?”

“...Just from its appearance and controller, it looks like an emulator for a really old game system.”

“Yes. Four cheap ICs read each other’s load while taking over each other’s calculations for the optimum circuit. But there’s no reason to stop at four. If you mess with the code and scale it up, you might be able to create a machine that can handle parallel processing with a hundred million or a billion units. The electronic traffic control is, simply put, insane, so the signal loss is nearly zero and almost all of the participating machines’ power can be utilized for the project. I know you know just how powerful a machine like that would be.”

“...Now that’s a scary thought. Are you planning to decode the human genome next?”

“I finished that more than half a year ago. Oh, but don’t tell anyone, okay?”

I had no idea if she was joking or not.

“Boiling metal in wine didn’t open the door to room-temperature superconductors, but it really is the insane ideas that are creating the new age of hardware. You’re a part of that for building a disaster environment simulator on your own, but these aren’t the cheap gifts you get by opening a textbook and building up your knowledge from the ground up. So I’m honestly jealous since I wasn’t given anything not seen in my academic records.”

“That’s just the grass looking greener on the other side. It sounds like mockery to the people who were driven out of academic society.”

“Truth, there’s nothing quite as meaningless as people with definite skill worrying about what the ignorant people around them think. Or maybe we should hope there is still room for misunderstanding in this age where big data and predictive AI searches are so well known.”

But setting aside whether we understood each other’s view...

“Is the person who made that chip at the festival?”

“I made a new account under a fake name and got them to friend me. It took 16,054 characters of building up trust before I achieved the rank of Peerless Friend. Not to mention giving five stars to all their shitty blog posts and web novels. I am the great Maiden who let her hacking tools handle it when I hacked into an IMF mainframe and changed the value of a dollar to 89 yen, yet here I was doing all this stuff manually! So make no mistake. Getting the chip itself would be best, but I’m at least getting the plans for it.”

“What if they take you for all you’re worth and then run off?”

“I’m prepared to pay the asking price. And to show the utmost respect for this amazingly cool and insane lone wolf inventor. But if I still don’t get it, I’ll make a physical connection and check through their storage. I’m getting my money’s worth either way.”

“...How festive of you.”

“Oh, even I’m praying it won’t come to that.”

“Why do Americans love to claim everything they do is grounded in justice?”

“Watch a Hollywood movie and you’ll understand. In fact, I’ve never seen a superhero that didn’t do the same thing. Oh, there they are!”

Anastasia started sneaking around after seeing someone walking on the sidewalk across the road from us. As far as I could tell it was only an exhausted middle-aged man wearing a bright gray suit that looked like he had only spent a grand total of 19,800 yen on his entire outfit. ...Could it be even cheaper than our school’s uniform?

“Hey, Anastasia. He just looks like someone heading out to eat a bento in the park because there’s no place for him at the office. Isn’t it possible he’s just a

victim being used as a relay point after being infected by a zombie machine virus?”

“What are you talking about, Truth? Can’t you sense that aura which can’t be detected using the modern trends? Well, maybe your own aura is just so powerful you can’t sense his.”

“We need to talk later, Anastasia. What kind of person do you think I am?”

Meanwhile, the giant LCD monitor on the wall of a discount store broke the silence.

“We have an update concerning the data leak at Kukyou 1st Broadcasting the other day.”

While waiting for the crosswalk light to turn green, Anastasia chuckled cruelly.

“I bet they never thought they would have to use their own broadcast to report on their fabricated abuse case. Could anything be more ironic, Truth!?”

“...The fact that you can laugh about this is all the proof anyone needs that you’re fit to be a hacker, Anastasia.”

“The fact that you can think you aren’t one after what you did shows that you’re more than qualified yourself.”

But it did not end there. The announcer on the screen plainly continued.

“Whether or not the rumored information is true, the methods used to release it were undoubtedly those of a cyber criminal. We are hereby announcing our intention to submit a report of damage while working with the security division and the police to track down the culprit.”

“Wait, wait, wait.”

“Tch. That’s a pretty cheap way of manipulating the narrative. Truth, they’re accusing you in a desperate attempt to distract from their own abuse scandal.”

The light had changed, so we crossed the crosswalk while continuing our conversation.

But TV was mass media. The ethics committees could be a pain in modern times, so they could not just read off baseless news stories. This farce would

require a lot of preparations below the surface beforehand.

“Maxwell, check the surrounding data. See if there is any digital trace of people investigating my personal information or the incident related to Shindou Matsuri.”

“While I am sick of these vague commands, I have detected something you should probably listen to first, unless you care what the third-rate sports journalists and online news posters are saying. This may be presumptuous of me, but I really think you would prefer to prioritize this.”

“...That’s incredible as ever. A series of 0s and 1s is smoothly using sarcasm.”

Anastasia peered over at the screen with her eyes wide.

But that aside, we were crossing the crosswalk toward that plain-looking office worker. And he seemed to have noticed us.

“Thanks for this,” he said with a bitter smile.

...Anastasia may have had me join her for this deal because if a small child pulled out a bunch of money on the roadside, it could look a lot like a nasty sort of mugging.

But I was not given time to think on that much longer.

“A camera crew has just entered the harbor container yard where I am physically located,” said Maxwell. “What they intend to do should go without saying.”

“They traced the signal? Are they planning to take in the machine I used to reveal my identity from the flow of data!?”

“A broadcast van is parked nearby to relay the live broadcast. They must plan to have an emergency news broadcast for their public execution. If necessary, I can physically erase all of the data. What are my instructions?”

“You mean you can short out all of the parallel processors that make up what you are, right? I’m not going to lose you to something so silly.”

“Feeling emotional is fine, but I have no physical arms or legs. If they know the number to my container, they will not overlook me.”

The middle-aged man must have sensed trouble because after handing Anastasia a postcard-sized computer chip packaged in plastic, he rapidly left the scene.

...This wasn't looking like something I could solve just by standing around. We moved to a nearby open café and sat at a table without ordering anything.

"Truth, send in a fake delivery order. Have the container moved!"

"No," said Maxwell. "The investigators have already entered the container yard, so physically moving me now would only draw attention to me."

Anastasia and I stared at the screen and started up a TV tuner app.

"Maxwell, it doesn't look like the actual broadcast has begun yet."

"Sure. But it is only a matter of time. They seem to want to secure the hacking machine before sending out the report of locating it."

Needless to say, I was done for if they had Maxwell. And criminal tools were disposed of after the trial, so Maxwell had no future either.

That said, moving the container in front of their noses would stand out too much, so it would be meaningless.

"They will make contact in approximately two minutes. If you have no plan by then, I will execute the physical erasure of all data even without your authorization."

Was there nothing we could do?

No, I had to calm down and think over it again.

I set my smartphone down on the round table and tapped my finger on the table.

"Maxwell, you've already hacked into the broadcast van they're using as a mobile base, right? That's how you know their broadcast schedule for the special report."

"Sure."

"...That means we aren't completely helpless. The lizard's tail is still alive."

"?"

Anastasia scooted her chair closer and tilted her head, but I didn't have time to explain.

"Use the broadcast van's host computer to access the camera crew's mobile devices and rewrite the internal files."

"What should I rewrite?"

"Change the target container number from D-19 to F-92. That's the one I found by accident before and wasn't sure what to do about."

"Sure. So it is that sort of plan. Then I shall also make a benevolent police report."

"Please do."

My little war buddy asked what was going on while holding her small robot dog in her arms, so I patted her head with one hand while the intercepted transmissions came in. The container yard was a fixed location. To make use of the security camera footage and the signals passing through the area, I had already tampered with the communication bases there.

"We don't need a director's cue. Once I give the signal, begin the broadcast. We'll teach them just who they were messing with here."

"I've found the target container."

"Double check it. F-92, right? Then let's take a look inside!!"

Anastasia raised her voice despite the waitress giving us a suspicious look while washing the windows.

"Truth!!"

"Don't worry. F-92 is the altered data. It isn't Maxwell's D-19."

"That will only delay them. They're sure to start searching the surrounding area afterwards. Even without a hint, they'll find the correct answer eventually if they check through every container. You need to come up with another idea!"

"I'm not giving them a chance to do that. I had those idiots in checkmate from the moment they touched the decoy container."

"?"

Anastasia was more confused by the look on my face than what I was saying. The complete lack of worry probably did look odd.

The following conversation played out on the intercepted signals:

“It has an analog lock. We’ll pry it open with a crowbar. Ready, set, go!”

“It’s open. Send the camera in. Begin the broadcast as soon as we have the hacking machine!!”

“...Hold on. What is this? A pile of bags full of white powder...?”

Good.

I clenched my fist below the table.

“Maxwell, intentionally trip some alarm or another.”

“I have already sent a police report. The police have arrived by both land and sea.”

As soon as I snapped my fingers for no real reason, the greatest comedy of the modern age began on my smartphone’s speaker.

“Freeze, you fools! This is the JCG!!”

“Eh? Wha-...?”

“Did you come here to swipe this smuggled contraband? Well, too bad for you, but merely touching a controlled substance is against the law. You are all under arrest!! ...This is going to be a long night for you.”

“N-no, we’re from the TV station...!!”

Anastasia looked confused at first, but as what had happened dawned on her, she seemed gradually overcome by an urge to laugh.

She set the small robot dog on her lap, held her belly with her small hands, and roared with laughter.

“Pff, heh heh. Ah ha ha ha!! Truth, when did fall to the level of a cheap fire alarm!?”

She was not referring to that button you shouldn’t press. That term also referred to a malicious hacker that used prank phone calls and home security

systems to send police officers to people's homes.

That aside...the waitress was giving us a pretty nasty look now. We hadn't ever ordered anything, so we got up from our seats.

"Maxwell, check over the entire container yard."

"Sure. The broadcast van has left and a member of the camera crew was tackled to the ground after impulsively attempting an escape. That adds obstruction of a public official's duties to the charges, so he will undoubtedly be arrested and detained. Once they leave, I will put out a false delivery order to move my container's physical location."

Anastasia tilted her head while letting the quadrupedal pet robot use its cameras and sensors to follow her on the sidewalk.

"Come to think of it, the TV station abandoned their camera crew right away, didn't they? They could have tried a little harder by claiming freedom of the press."

"Only because they were still preparing for the live broadcast. If it had already been playing over the airwaves, they might have resisted it to the bitter end, but they were able to avoid any trouble for themselves by cutting off the lizard's tail."

In a way, that helped me out a lot.

I breathed a gentle sigh while watching a group of electric bicycles tear down the side of the road at highway speeds. They had likely had their power limiters removed by messing with the program.

"But, user, in that case..."

"Yeah, it means the group at the container yard wasn't made up of regular employees. They were probably hired as an external security team that the TV station itself can claim ignorance of."

In other words, they were professional hackers that a well-known company could not officially hire. If a group like that had come to the container yard to take revenge, then this could end up being a lot of trouble.

"Hmm. A company-sponsored hacker team, huh?" said Anastasia. "Even if we

limit it to pro-Japanese ones, that isn't enough to narrow it down."

I was fine with just ending the fabricated abuse by preventing the TV station from going too far, but I had made a much larger enemy below the surface.

I had already unwittingly picked a fight with them.

But I did not regret what I had done.

I glanced over at Anastasia while she said hello to a college girl with a pet robot like they were two wealthy wives or something. ...And it occurred to me that Anastasia was technically a college girl herself despite how small she was.

So what mattered now?

"Maxwell, check the local police. I'm sure that hacker team will be released soon enough, but don't let your guard down. This isn't over yet."

"Sure. What should I do about the arrested criminals?"

"I don't care if they're released. But track them using security cameras and satellites. If they guide us to a hideout where more of their companions are hiding, we can use that to our advantage."

There was one point I was curious about.

Fighting someone I could not actually see was fine by me. The sparks had reached me from the moment the TV camera was brought to the container yard. But there was something I definitely wanted to have before starting a battle of 0s and 1s.

"...That was way too fast to obtain Maxwell's actual container number."

"Could you simply be underestimating your opponent?"

"Yes, the kind of miracle hacker seen in movies might exist somewhere in this wide world. By the way, Maxwell, you know the container yard cargo list management computer, right? Not the ship transport one that's fluidly updated all the time, but the one that's practically sitting around in storage."

"Sure. The Winners 3.1 Future Edition."

Anastasia did a spit take while having her pet robot greet the other one (although I imagine it was actually making cyber-attacks using IR and short-

range EM just for fun).

“Bff!? How many bits is that!? That kind of fossil should be in a museum!!”

“The old man stationed there is obsessed with retro *go* games and refuses to give it up.”

Even I could only shrug at that one.

He had very different demands compared to those of us who sought processing speed and flexibility. And he had used it with care for so long, so it was definitely worthy of respect.

“Shockingly, it’s a yellowed desktop with a 5-inch floppy drive and a cable plugged directly into the phone line. That’s probably good enough since he only searches for text data, but it actually prevents any modern hacking methods from working. He unplugs it from the phone line whenever it isn’t in use, it doesn’t have much memory, and the drivers are so old that malware won’t run. And while the company has abandoned the OS, that old man has been writing his own security patches every month. So I doubt your average hacker’s homemade malware could randomly access it while gathering data from the high-speed internet. You would have to be pinpoint targeting that retro machine and rebuilding your hacking tools for use on it. And yet they pulled it off only a day or two after the TV station incident. How did they do that?”

“Ah,” said Anastasia, finally getting my point.

Since she had completed her greeting (or mock battle or benchmark test) with the college girl, we walked away with no real destination in mind.

...Yes, it may have been possible to hack into that fossil of a machine that lived on with the old man’s original patches. But there was nothing you could do without something first telling you your target was a fossil machine like that.

“Several companies and universities shared data during my development phase,” said Maxwell. “Could their servers have been illegally accessed?”

“Just seeing the circuit diagrams I shared wouldn’t tell them you’re in a container. Much less where that container would be.”

We arrived at a small park where four-wheel-drive RC cars were driving

around. They had round targets on the top and they seemed to be programmed to automatically flee when a cork gun was aimed at them.

“I also used to supply periodic simulation data,” said Maxwell. “Could they have located the source of that signal?”

“We had that data loop around the planet three times just for fun, remember? I doubt they could have found you like that.”

Programming was taught in normal school classes these days. I thought about the issue while seeing children holding tablets out toward the fleeing off-road cars and trying to stop them using IR hacks.

Was I just being too self-conscious?

Was this opponent simply more skilled than me and some unknown person in the sea of data already had me in the palm of their hand?

If not...

“...This might be a troublesome opponent.”

“Hm? Truth, you don’t mean...”

“Yes.” I nodded. “This might be a hacker who uses a special ‘power’ as an Archenemy.”

For example.

If a hacker could read people’s minds, they could omit the trouble of searching for unknown vulnerabilities or infecting the target’s computer with a key logger. They could simply type in the password to log in to the secret system.

If they had special eyes that could predict the future, they could erase their tracks 2 seconds before being traced and escape every single time.

If they could control an engineer’s mind, they could even have a vulnerability intentionally built into a system during development.

You might want to laugh that off as silly, but in this age, superhuman Archenemies like Zombies and Vampires were walking around like they owned the place. And computer networks were not a privilege granted only to

powerless humans. Even Anastasia was actually a maid fairy known as a Silky.

By linking together an ancient power with the futuristic network covering the planet, new possibilities would emerge. That was a privilege only granted to those born to the proper bloodline, so a commonplace person like me could never hope to match them.

This was likely the most troublesome opponent there was: a supernatural hacker.

They were a standalone hacker that could force their way to the core of your secrets even if you disconnected the cable or isolated the system.

“Pro-Japan, working for a company, and has a supernatural hacker...?”

...If I was up against an individual or group like that, then even that Winners 3.1 fossil would not be much of a barrier. They would draw the right card right away and send their forces to my inner citadel. Even moving Maxwell’s location might not do much to hide.

Who was the enemy?

What kind of Archenemy?

What was their power and how adaptable was it?

I couldn’t relax until I knew that. And running away wasn’t going to answer any of those questions. I had to attack, attack, and keep attacking until I had revealed their unseen identity...

“User, I have found some odd data connected to Kukyou 1st Broadcasting.”

“Only now? What is it this time?”

We left the park and passed by a lot of makeshift shops with amps and speakers lined up on the road. ...One of them looked like a junkshop selling parts for stun guns. Talk about dangerous.

“It is a record of a large sum of money being repaid. It was sent from Kukyou 1st Broadcasting and to the Japan branch of the Wild@Hunt online shopping company. Normally, this sort of payment is one-way from the sponsor to the TV station, so repayments like these should be very rare.”

I grabbed the back of Anastasia's collar as she started approaching a makeshift shop and she tilted her head.

"Hm? Hmm? Could they not play the company's ads because of an on-air accident or something?"

"Maxwell."

"I checked this year's records at the office of the TV station's lawyer, but there was no trouble related to a program that had any kind of sponsorship contract with Wild@Hunt. In other words, we should look at this the other way around."

"The question isn't why the station was repaying them. The question is why Wild@Hunt sent them so much money in the first place."

A lot of junk was lined up like they really were silver accessories. There were a lot of handmade toys like a signal-blocking smartphone case that gave you a completely offline environment by lining it with lead, or a high-sensitivity antenna disguised as a selfie stick.

"My investigation suggests that Wild@Hunt had only just now purchased broadcasting rights for this time period. Although it was a hidden sponsorship."

That referred to a sponsorship where they paid the money without having an ad played. It was meaningless from a business perspective, but it apparently happened from time to time when someone wanted to support a specific program, such as a sports broadcast or a local comedy show.

But Wild@Hunt would not need to do that since they produced two or three new ads every quarter.

"When checking on the materials that Kukyou 1st Broadcasting has created by an art subcontractor, I discovered Wild@Hunt listed as a sponsor on a press conference backboard. But checking all past footage shows no sign of it ever being used."

...That meant they were holding onto it so they could use it later. And if we had not interrupted, they would have begun an emergency live broadcast during which they revealed Maxwell's existence.

The heads of the TV station had wanted to accuse me with Wild@Hunt's logo written prominently in the background.

Anastasia looked utterly baffled as she crouched down on the roadside to view dress-up clothes for a small dog robot like hers.

"It's Hack or Slave."

"What?"

"That's a hacker team that specializes in corporate contracts! They also work for a few companies besides Wild@Hunt. And I have heard rumors that they're pro-Japan and have a supernatural hacker. They claim to be white hackers, but don't you believe it! They work with corporations and the police to get their names off of the investigation lists even when they're up to no good! You could call them 'toxic bleach-soaked hackers' instead! It really pisses me off when people act like they were inspired by me!"

But even Anastasia seemed to have no idea why Hack or Slave would show up here. She looked completely bewildered.

"What does this mean?" she asked. "Was the TV station pressured into causing this commotion by Hack or Slave's client, Wild@Hunt? But why!? That special report was supposed to be a way of avoiding blame for that abuse they created!!"

"Did anything happen related to that Elf Archenemy, Sakai Iori? It looks like we need to take another look at the abuse that started all of this."

I slowly breathed a sigh while looking at screwdriver sets for dismantling smartphones, making them even smaller than ones for glasses.

"That may have been set up the same as this: Kukyou 1st Broadcasting was doing the actual work while Wild@Hunt was in charge. I can't imagine what such a major corporation hoped to gain from manipulating an incident within a single closed household, though."

Hack or Slave was a supernatural hacker group that could use an Archenemy's power. I had thought it was odd for such a powerful group to have a contract with a local TV station, but that firepower made a lot more sense if they were the hired troubleshooters of a global corporation like Wild@Hunt.

...But that was bad news if true.

Online stores were exposed to cyber attacks on a daily basis. Even if a hacker had no special ideology or belief driving them, they could still be driven by the desire to use a trick to not have to pay. If Hack or Slave was a team that handled such high-risk matters, they would have far greater field experience than either of us. No one understood a criminal like a criminal. They had likely fought against other overpowered supernatural hackers at times.

And that was just the personnel.

You also had to remember the big data collected from billions of people, their delivery trucks' drive recorders, the countless cameras from their unmanned delivery drones, and all the other dangerous toys connected in parallel using the largescale communication equipment at their facilities around the world... If Wild@Hunt had loaned them use of that equipment, then Hack or Slave would have the firepower to start a war on the electronic web! If they didn't consider the consequences, they really could bring down an entire country!!

While looking through the junk for sale, Anastasia spoke loudly to help bring the color back to her pale face.

"B-but, Truth, you beat them. You dodged the live broadcast and destroyed Wild@Hunt's plans. We won!"

"No, I bet that was just a farce they needed to play out because they can't publicly release data acquired through illegal means. So no matter what the public institutions say, Wild@Hunt still sees Amatsu Satori as their top suspect... and thus the enemy they must defeat. I'll be in their sights forever until I do something about this."

Meaning...

"I can't rest easy until I strike back at Wild@Hunt's system. I have to take on a giant corporation that's become a household name and might be more well-known than most countries. Goddammit!"

[Support by] The Wild@Hunt Corporation [DELTA brain]

In recent years, this American international data corporation has cemented their name in the global consciousness as *the* online store. They primarily work in the distribution business, but they are also known for branching out into many other fields like AI research, satellites, video streaming, ebooks, and driverless cars.

The American headquarters has around 20,000 official employees.

The complexity of the organizational structure makes it difficult to have a full picture of the national branches, but it is estimated there are more than a million employees in all.

There are accusations that they have a connection to the Department of Defense and are assisting with research into unmanned weapons development and military supply transport technology, but the American headquarters' public relations chief has fully denied the rumors.

Chapter 3

It was night.

That was the time for a Vampire like Erika. Ayumi was with us too, but she seemed more of a daytime person even as a Zombie Archenemy.

At any rate, we met up in front of the train station, which was even busier than usual thanks to the festival mood. With Erika, Ayumi, and Anastasia, I was the only human in the group.

“Oh? Onii-chan, you didn’t invite the Class Rep?”

“Sister. Do you really think I’m going to bring that precious girl to the Techno Parade which is neither sexy nor cute and full of hackers who have no experience being around girls? I’m not going to spend the night listening to her exhausted sighs.”

“Fuguu!!”

Ayumi was already puffing out her cheeks again, but I honestly found it a mystery why my sisters wanted to visit such a niche festival. Then again, they were family, so I could relax more when walking around with them.

“It’s 7:30, so how about we go the standard route of checking out what food is available?”

“Erika, it’s impressive how you just come out and say what Ayumi was fidgeting restlessly about because she was really looking forward to it but couldn’t bring herself to say it.”

“Fuguu!? Onii-chan, don’t treat me like an incarnation of gluttony...!”

“Ayumi-chan. Satori-kun was only trying to get that cute reaction out of you.”

There were no age or gender restrictions on being a hacker, but it did look like there were more guys here. It may have been an extension of how engineering

departments were full of guys even in the idealized campus life seen in dramas.

“By the way, Onii-chan, what’s that hanging from your hip? A giant water gun???”

“It’s my secret weapon. It was a real lucky find.”

But just as I answered her...

“Wah, what is that!? There’s a mech carrying shaved ice on a tray, Onii-chan!”

“That’s based on a bomb squad robot. I doubt those are sold commercially, so did they steal the designs from somewhere and build one?”

“I wish they would stop abusing 3D printers,” said Anastasia. “The tech itself is good.”

“Oh? Satori-kun, the menu says I’ll choose the melon flavor. Does it use leading questions to draw out that answer?”

“Yeah. It might use predictive algorithms to predict what you’ll choose and then provides comments to restrict any other opinion.”

...But while we engineering types tended to take an arrogant and cynical attitude about everything, my sisters’ more naïve reaction seemed to have gathered more performers around us.

And when it came to making money at night, there would always be lots of food available. There were the standards like yakisoba, takoyaki, okonomiyaki, candied apples, shaved ice, and chocolate bananas, but also some Western options like crepes, donuts, and frankfurters. That unique midpoint between a snack and a meal tugged at a half-forgotten childlike part inside you.

Anastasia’s eyes widened because she was unfamiliar with this country’s festivals.

“Why do Japanese foods look so nice? Even the candies are so elegant.”

“This is some of the greasiest food available in Japan, so what kind of diet do you have to have for this to look refreshing!?”

“Eh? During the Los Angeles convention, it was all pizza, fried chicken, thick-cut ham steak, and poutine. Do you know what that is? It’s a giant pile of fries

covered in cheese, lard, and gravy.”

“...Is your country trying to wage war with food?”

That was what you got with a culture that went beyond “meat, vegetables, meat, meat, rice, bread, and vegetables” to have “beef, beef, chicken, beef, chicken, and a supplement”. They weren’t interested in vegetables or even fish, yet they claimed to be a healthy nation.

Anyway.

“I heard they’re doing fireworks afterwards.”

“There will probably be drones flying around to record it, so we should watch from a distance. One of them might even get hit by a firework and crash.”

Since Erika and Ayumi were with us, we stuck to the normal festival area and avoided the denser areas with a junk trade show or where four people sat around a table arguing while the mahjong match was played out by preset programs. But there were hints of insanity even in the relatively normal areas, like small robot fish swimming around in the goldfish scooping game or simulators being used to predict the results of the bingo game.

“Is it even possible to catch these goldfish robots? They swim away whenever the scoop gets close.”

“Think of it like a puzzle, Ayumi. They always swim away in the same direction, so stick a scoop in at these two points and you can drive it into a corner.”

It was a little different, but it still felt like a festival that would make for some nice memories.

Then my smartphone vibrated.

Maxwell’s speech bubble was displayed on the screen.

“Cyber attack detected. It is clearly specifically targeting your device. I am stopping it, but would you like to handle this manually?”

“ ... ”

I immediately looked around, but that wasn’t going to tell me who was doing

this. It was even possible the culprit was using fiber optic cables and wireless LAN to attack from the other side of the planet.

...This was not some hacker attacking on a whim and if Anastasia was to be believed, then this would be Hack or Slave that worked for Wild@Hunt.

“Hm? What is it, Onii-chan?”

“Nothing. More importantly, you catch this one, Ayumi. You can take the prize for yourself.”

There was no reason to worry my sisters. I communicated with Maxwell by typing in text instead of the usual voice recognition.

“Maxwell, pretend you’re being overwhelmed so Hack or Slave will continue their attack. Use that time to investigate the exact method they’re using. Knowing that will tell us what kind of person we’re dealing with.”

“The task is already underway. I believe this is an antlion trap where a fake public wireless router is used to lure in the target and steal the mobile device’s data.”

...They had not given up.

They had screwed up at the harbor container yard, but they were still searching for official evidence that I was the one that had defied Wild@Hunt by revealing the fabricated abuse incident. They had even launched a cyber attack.

If they could prove it had been me, my life would be left in tatters. In fact, my family would be in trouble too.

And if they drove out their enemy, it would only encourage them. They might repeat that fabricated abuse incident.

I want to be alone.

If I am, I won’t cause any trouble for anyone.

Then mom and dad and everyone can smile again.

Laugh at me if you want.

We were talking about a complete stranger. I would gain nothing in return for saving them. Not a reward and not any kind of money. And yet I was taking on

an international corporation over it.

But I couldn't help but remember that Elf girl crouched down and muttering those words with empty eyes. I couldn't help but remember seeing the same expression I had once had...no, her case was even worse because it included unwarranted violence.

I had just so happened to visit that old secret base.

And I had found someone already there.

That was all it was.

But...

...I could not allow this to continue.

They were finally regaining what they once had. Parent and child were regaining a relationship in which they could share a nikuman. Wild@Hunt? Hack or Slave? Who cares what they want! Those parents managed to avoid divorcing. They were approaching recovery, something my family could never do. It might seem perfectly normal, but that's exactly what makes it so hard and so important! I would never allow anyone to carelessly tear off the scab of that half-healed wound!!

“...”

We finished the robot goldfish scooping and attempted a ring toss that altered the path of the airborne ring with tons of fans. All the while, I operated my smartphone with just my thumb.

“That's all? If it primarily uses a wireless router, they would have to set it up and then wait like a spider in its web. That seems too random to be targeting an individual.”

“Public wireless routers do more than communicate between the base station and the mobile devices. They also communicate between the base stations owned by different companies.”

“Well, yeah. Otherwise there wouldn't be a shared worldwide internet. Besides, they should be monitoring each other so they don't cause interference by sending similar frequencies in the same area.”

“So it seems the target of the antlion trap is not the mobile devices. It is all of the base stations in the area. When the identification signal of a base station is detected, it seems to send back malware disguised as a response code.”

“Wow! Why did yours fly straight, Onii-chan?”

“The point of this game is to input the angle and rotation speed of the fans into a simulator to calculate out the complex movements of wind and gain a predictive path for the ring toss.”

Of course, no matter how strict the defenses of an individual computer, if the router used to connect to the world at large was infected, its defenses were suspect.

And my smartphone connected to the container yard using a normal line. They must have been targeting that.

“Can we switch to a different base station?”

“At any time. But their attack seems to be indiscriminately infecting anything they come across, from public wireless LANs to home wireless devices that are leaking all their information. It is only a matter of time before there are no safe lines left.”

“Ayumi can have the teddy bear, Anastasia can have the plastic bath bunny, and Erika can have the glass high heels.”

“I sense a difference in our gifts.”

“I sense a difference in our gifts.”

I ignored the glare from the two small ones.

“Then what vulnerability is the malware using? Can we knock out their way in or write an anti-virus program to regain safe wireless routers to use?”

“I have already checked and have detected 24 different kinds of malicious software. Instead of persistently showing off their own malware, I believe Hack or Slave is sending out many varieties with similar results and seeing if any of them are successful.”

“What a pain... Locating the router at the source of the infection and cutting off the data isn't going to stop the attack, is it?”

“About that. There is one point I find curious.”

“Tell me anything you have.”

“Sure. The antlion trap wireless router sending out the infected signal seems to be moving.”

“Hm?”

I thought we were done with the ring toss, but Ayumi complained and insisted on continuing to play. Beating it without the help of a simulator was like crossing a minefield without a metal detector, but she must have really hated losing.

“Its average speed is 3km/h. That is about the same as walking speed and it is moving irregularly around the festival much like you. However, it does not seem to be pursuing anyone. Instead, it seems to be searching out wireless routers in the area to infect them. Based on the data from a map app, it is not following the roads or sidewalks, but it is not passing through buildings. So unless they are using a flying drone...”

“Hack or Slave is here on the ground at the Techno Parade? Wearing a backpack containing a computer, just like the surveyors for a map app? Maxwell!!”

“Sure. The ‘!!’ was unnecessary. You have given me permission to attack Hack or Slave, so I will not hold back.”

I heard a bursting sound like something had exploded nearby. No it was the inflation of a large and solid balloon like a car’s airbag. And while a stir ran through the crowd, I saw a small man wearing a bulging backpack floating up from the ground like he was on a moonwalk.

That was the source of the trouble: Hack or Slave.

He was the one who had rewritten online data to make it look like a girl was secretly causing her parents trouble and betraying them. He was the one applying all that external pressure so they would resort to violence...!!

The earth’s gravity seemed to not apply to him as he planted his feet on a large tour bus and then jumped to the top of a 5-story multi-tenant building in

the very next step.

I threw out all my assumptions and gave a shout.

“A hovering suit? Is he going to get away!?”

That was a flight device that used a large balloon to secure buoyancy that matched your own body weight and allowed you to steer using small gas jets. It was more like jumping than flying, but it allowed you to make pole vault jumps with each and every step. I had heard the military was putting serious research into the technology as mountain gear.

“Hack or Slave can continue to infect nearby wireless routers while on the run, so they can continue to attack us. So do not forget that they will maintain the upper hand.”

“I know that. Let’s go, Maxwell!!”

“Eh? Ah? Onii-chan!?”

“Erika, take care of Ayumi and Anastasia. Keep an eye on your surroundings!!”

“Yes, yes.”

I left Anastasia with my sisters and took off running through the gaps in the crowd. A hovering suit was mostly meant to let you float, so it could not quickly pick up speed like an airplane or helicopter. But being able to ignore the roads and crowds and take the shortest route gave him an overwhelming advantage. And when looking up from the ground, the large building rooftops formed blind spots. Once I lost sight of him, he could hide somewhere and continue targeting my data!

“User, you are on the ground and Hack or Slave is in the air. Even if you successfully pursue him, how will you settle this? Even if you reach him on a roof, he can jump to the next building and you will have no way of pursuing.”

“Maxwell, sync my secret weapon with my smartphone.”

I pulled out the device hanging at my hip that looked like a two-handed water gun.

“Once that’s complete, I’ll shoot that guy down. I’ll shoot down Hack or Slave.”

“Sure, understood. Begin when you are ready.”

This was not the gun nation of America, so he probably thought I couldn't reach him if he was off the ground.

But that was too naïve.

I ran along while aiming the thick gun barrel into the sky. It didn't use gunpowder, so I didn't need to think about recoil. I targeted the distant flying man with what looked a lot like a shotgun microphone and I pulled the plastic trigger.

Anti-Materiel Redtooth.

The name was ridiculous, but the EM signal emitted by that ultimate weapon did devastating damage to the flight device keeping the Hack or Slave man afloat.

The same short-range Redtooth signal used for wireless headphones and keyboards was given powerful directionality to send illegitimate data to every device within 1000 meters. Since I had not known when or how I would be attacked, I had bought it from the various junk that Anastasia and I had looked through that evening.

“That stopped the input of malware, but the output was so powerful that Hack or Slave's system connections seem to have failed.”

“Well, I didn't see many cables for how big a system that is, so I figured it was probably managed wirelessly!”

I had essentially sent out a jamming signal. Even without infecting it with a virus and making some subtle changes to the registry, I could cause a malfunction.

The balloon man lost his balance and seemed intent on making an emergency landing somewhere. Even if the problem was temporary, he was entrusting his life to that flight device. Until he detected a virus or another obvious cause, he would not immediately attempt another flight. Anyone would hesitate if they were handed a cracked spacesuit and placed in front of a spaceship's airlock. Your life was important.

In Anastasia's world of hackers, a malfunction that might have been an attack but might not have been was far more frightening than an obvious attack.

I used some wire to tie the Redtooth cannon to the metal pole of nearby road sign and adjusted the angle so it was aimed near the rooftop.

"Maxwell, use the building plans to check the location of the emergency stairs. I'm going to run up to the rooftop and end this while Hack or Slave is afraid of crashing!"

"Sure. The emergency stairs are on the outside. They are near the back, so you should be able to reach them from the alley."

Knowing that, I just had to hurry.

With the Redtooth cannon's EM attack continuing from the surface, the Hack or Slave man would think I was still down there aiming at him, but that wouldn't last forever. If I didn't end this before that small man regained his cool, I would lose my chance.

I ran into the alley and found the stairs in question. The entrance to the rusty metal stairs was blocked with a locked door, but it was little different from a cheap metal fence. I ignored the lock and climbed right over it. Then I ran up the stairs.

I clicked my tongue when I reached the roof.

"What is this mess? It's like a jungle gym covered in sponge guard and morning glory vines!"

"User, you are already in the danger zone. Please watch your voice and any other noises."

When looking up from the ground, I had thought it was an open space the size of four home ec classrooms. But instead of a flat square rooftop, I found not just the standard water tank and elevator motor room, but industrial air conditioners larger than fridges, a home garden, and storage containers stacked several high. Even the owner must have found it to be a pain to deal with because they had set up construction scaffolding and diagonally-leaning ladders to create shortcuts through it all.

It was like a 3D maze or a basic training obstacle course in a movie. The Hack or Slave man could come from any direction: front, back, left, right, above, or below.

“Maxwell, the Redtooth cannon is still active on the ground, right?”

“Sure. The link with your smartphone is still active. I am using the errors in satellite TV reception in the surrounding homes as a substitute for radar to monitor for airborne objects, but there is no sign of the hovering suit jumping from that roof.”

That meant the small man was somewhere on this rooftop.

I gulped and crouched low. I slowly moved further in alongside a fence covered in the vines growing out from the home garden.

...*Damn*. I was supposed to be the one who had him cornered, but his landing spot had worked in his favor and I felt cornered.

“Hack or Slave is continuing the antlion trap attack, right? Can’t you detect the location of the source signal?”

“That is unreliable at this distance. I can only tell it is coming from that rooftop.”

That was when I heard a quiet metallic sound from the side.

...*Wait, the side?*

Is there something on the other side of the vine-covered fence?

“Warning!!”

Rather than actually detecting something, I simply ducked my head down in response to Maxwell’s message.

And then...an artillery shell or something broke through the fence and flew my way!

Technically, it was impossible for me to know what had happened. I just knew the fence had been torn to pieces and blown my way and that had hit me and sent me rolling along the concrete.

The sudden explosion echoed across the rooftop and through the noise of the

festival on the surface. I just hoped that wouldn't cause a panic that got people hurt.

“Gah...bah...!!”

“Warning: this is not over yet. Please hide behind nearby cover!!”

I could no longer visually process the text from Maxwell. Because of the truly bizarre thing I had seen.

What is that?

What is that, what is that, what is that, what the hell is that!?

...If my eyes could be trusted, it was a round octopus with its five sucker-covered tentacles spread out in a star shape like a handmade cookie. I had seen a documentary about this before. If artificial muscles reached a practical level, it would be easier to design mollusk robots that did not have to stand, like slugs or octopuses, rather than dogs, cats, crabs, scorpions, or humans.

Of course, this was no mere toy.

Even now, it was giving off the ominous sound of high-voltage electricity.

Was its round body a circular loop gun barrel? For something like a railgun!?

The round body alone was 3 meters. If the 5 tentacles were stretched out, it would probably be around double that, but if the round body contained a circular loop railgun, then there would be no space inside for a person. It was an attack drone. Since it did not immediately move in close, the movement must have been an afterthought and was really only used to attach it to a firing point on the floor, wall, or ceiling.

But that thing was larger than a surfboard, so the Hack or Slave man could not have been walking around with it. And landing here should have been an accident for him. So where had that ultimate weapon come from!?

The large hole in the center of the round body was aimed at me. That was likely the muzzle.

The flashes of electricity were converted into a violent musical scale.

“!!”

As soon as I got down and rolled to the side, a fearsome gust of wind passed by. The shortcut scaffolding collapsed and the jagged shards of air conditioning units flew every which way.

Think.

I had to think.

...He would not have lucked into something like this. And it was odd for the first shot to not hit when I had been defenseless. I had not dodged it, so its aim had to have been off. Something had interfered with the targeting algorithm that it had prioritized over pursuing its target.

Which meant...

“Maxwell, check to see what was in the path of that shot. Hack or Slave must be afraid of being shot by his own weapon!!”

“There is a backup power gas pipe running along the straight line path that links you and the unknown.”

“Predict a ballistic path!”

I grabbed a shovel from the home garden and swung it horizontally to throw it at the small pipe running up the side of a metal pillar 10 meters away.

The hit made a loud noise.

I didn't know if that had actually damaged the gas pipe, but I heard a rustling sound from the jungle-gym-like area overhead.

Flames, smoke, and heat all rose, so he must not have wanted an explosion.

“There he is. Calculate every pillar or flammable object that would affect Hack or Slave's safety if they were broken or detonated. I can move around while staying near those off-limits targets.”

“Sure. I will display a cursor on your smartphone's image. Please move from circle to circle.”

A course was drawn out on the smartphone like stepping stones, but the situation was fluid. If the small man changed location, this would all fall apart.

Waiting around would not improve anything.

I could not afford to lose here.

I would protect my and my family's futures. And I wouldn't let them restart that fabricated abuse!!

The octopus kept its 5 tentacles spread out in a star shape and constantly glared at me with its anti-personnel radar and IR guidance while I passed right in front of it on my way to the top of the half-collapsed jungle gym.

...But where had the small man gotten that 3m octopus attack drone from? It may have been larger than my bed. I had been right when I assumed he wouldn't have been able to carry it around.

"Come to think of it, that's true of the hovering suit as well."

It would be portable since it was worn, but it would still stand out. It would be like walking around town while dressed for sky diving. The Techno Parade hacker festival was underway, but he was not a performer or cosplayer. Would someone trying to blend into the crowds for their antlion trap really want to stand out like that?

"In that case, did the hovering suit appear out of thin air just like the octopus? Like some kind of magic?"

He was doing what should have been impossible. He was showing techniques that could not be explained with the laws of physics.

Which meant...

"Is this the work of a supernatural hacker using an Archenemy's power?"

"Don't predict my lines, Maxwell."

Had this been the trick to locating the harbor container yard and procuring a system for hacking into that retro machine?

I used a diagonally-leaning ladder in place of stairs to reach the upper level. This felt much the same. It was like lining up empty rectangular pipes to create a jungle gym.

"It's about time I had a weapon of my own."

I borrowed a wrench that was hanging from a pillar (probably for tightening

the scaffolding's bolts) and I dismantled a bug zapper to remove the chip inside.

"These industrial ones are scary. Check out this capacitor. It's bigger around than my thumb."

"Get carried away if you like, but do not blame me when you shock yourself."

The power source looked like a solar-powered rechargeable battery. The battery was the size of two light novels, so I borrowed that.

I took the wire around a plastic umbrella I found lying around, wrapped it around like a candy cane, and attached it to either end to create a stun rod.

"Maxwell, use my smartphone screen and color code what is and isn't an electrical conductor. I might be able to use this at a distance by sending the charge through the wall or floor. ...As long as I make sure I don't hit my own feet in the process."

Not even this would be enough if the Hack or Slave man was an Archenemy on the same level as a Vampire or Zombie. But at the same time, they were not all powerful. No matter how mysterious the phenomenon, if I kept that in mind, I wouldn't be led astray.

...If he could just summon any device he imagined, he wouldn't have to stop at this. If he could send a boomerang-shaped bomber into the sky, he could crush all resistance. And if he could create a computer large enough to fill the desert, he could brute force his way past Maxwell's defenses.

But he hadn't done either of those.

So why couldn't he?

Mass? Complexity? The barrier between manned and unmanned? A distance from himself?

It was the same as why that artificial muscle octopus could not attack me. No matter how big the enemy was, if I understood the rules, I could use them to my advantage. And I was up against an immortal who was far more powerful than a human. If I gave up on thinking, I had no future.

Or so I thought.

Until I heard that "roar" anyway.

The entire rooftop was ruled by the crude roaring of an engine.

Cold sweat poured from my body.

It couldn't be a car in this complex jungle gym. And what was the stereotypical weapon loaded with an engine?

"A chainsaw!?"

As soon as I shouted that, he appeared from behind a storage container. The man looked middle-aged, but he was even shorter than me. This was the hacker from Hack or Slave. And the item he held at his hip was a power tool caked with dirt!!

Had he summoned this instead of the octopus!?

"Dammit!!"

I frantically moved back and away from him.

Just then, an unknown sensation crawled along my spine. I had no proof, but I imagined it was the fingertip of a beautiful grim reaper.

Yes.

That was right.

The chainsaw was caked with dirt? Even though he had summoned it like magic, just like the hovering suit and slow octopus???

"...Oh, no."

Oh, no. Oh, no! Oh, no!!

That means...!?

The wall right next to me was suddenly blown through from a completely different direction than the chainsaw man.

...The Hack or Slave man had been trying to draw my attention to the chainsaw and move me away from the dangerous pillar. That way he had a line of fire for that long-range attack.

In other words, the chainsaw itself had been picked up from the home garden and he had used his device summoning for something else.

I was completely caught off guard.

So why was I still conscious?

“Gahahh!?”

I had pressed the stun rod against my own stomach, using the high-voltage current to knock myself in an irregular direction. That had sent me just barely outside of the enemy’s predicted aim.

I had escaped the first shot.

But now I could not move properly. I could not stand up and I could only just barely manage to crawl. Through the hole in the wall, I saw a thick metal pipe reminiscent of a bazooka that was supported by three legs driven into the ground like stakes. There had been no sound or smell of gunpowder, so I guessed it fired metal shells with a spring thicker than a human arm, just like a bizarre British weapon I had heard about.

If that octopus railgun with tentacles spread out in a star shape had fired at the floor from below, I would have been done for, but that had not happened.

One thing was obvious since he had gone out of his way to pick up a power tool as a decoy.

“Pant, pant...”

He could only summon one device at a time. Instead of making and summoning them anew, it was more like he could transform a set amount of mass like he was molding clay. If it had become that spring cannon now, then the octopus was not down there anymore.

And he had not brought out anything on as ridiculous a scale as a bomber or nuclear bomb. He may have been restricted by some kind of range.

On top of all that, the Hack or Slave man was not instantly producing or swapping out devices in front of me. That small man always hid and made a surprise attack from a position of safety.

“Gh...”

...The preparations took time.

That meant he could not leave himself exposed to even an amateur human like me.

I had to use that.

I had to trust in the data I had gained through my survival.

I would mostly be relying on speculation from here on out, though.

I doubted it was any manual work on his part. He wasn't creating a miniature that was turned to life size or drawing on the back of a flyer and having the picture come out of the paper. I mean, I was close enough that I could hear it when he jumped in surprise. If he was doing that kind of work, I would hear him carving down the material or smell the paint. And there were no stains on his sleeves or fingertips. So the trigger was likely a mobile device. Maybe he created 3D blueprints with a CAD program, made a full color illustration, or viewed the blueprint or a 3D diagram to perfectly memorize its structure.

And I didn't have to work out the exact conditions he needed. If all I wanted to do was defeat him, then knowing the source of his attacks was enough.

Besides, what was it that had caused him to panic before?

Because I had driven him onto the rooftop?

No.

Because I hit him with a powerful directional EM waves using the Redtooth cannon. More than a cyber attack or his hovering suit crashing, he had been afraid of the jamming cutting off his mobile signal!

The small man approached with roaring chainsaw in hand. And from the other direction, the spring cannon...did not fire a second shot? The powerful spring used to propel the shell must have needed to be compressed again.

I could not speak out loud. While crawling as close as I could, I operated the smartphone with my thumb.

I had not given up yet.

I was not going to die here. I would not allow Erika, Ayumi, or the others to be placed on the chopping block. I would not allow those newfound smiles to be smashed anew by that fabricated abuse!

I didn't care if it was ugly.

I didn't care if rescuing Sakai Iori was really just a vicarious way of overcoming my own past!!

"Maxwell. This Hack or Slave man is a malicious hacker who sends viruses to all the nearby wireless routers to steal the communication data of the mobile devices using them."

"Sure."

"But that also means he's setting up a bunch of hotlines for the infected routers to send data back to him. ...Search for a nearby router that's still uninfected and send it a virus of our own. As soon as he opens his hotline, we'll use that to infect his own mobile device."

"That will mean infecting the many users of that router."

"Hack or Slave is randomly using a few dozen different data leakage viruses. Attack only mobile devices that have cleanly patched up every last one of those vulnerabilities."

"Understood."

No one was stupid enough to get infected by their own virus, but commercial security software could not protect against some viruses. If someone had taken aim at exactly these viruses, they had to be the culprit.

"Backdoor setup complete. I can take control of the Archenemy Dwarf's mobile device at any time."

Dwarf?

Oh, right! A Dwarf!

That tiny species from Norse Mythology was known for being skillful with their hands and was most well-known for creating the weapons of the gods out of pure gold. It made perfect sense once I had the answer and pure gold was used in the wiring of precision circuits.

...If he had started his search from the TV station, had he investigated that trunk room and arrived at the tower computer I used as a honeypot? I had completely destroyed that and disposed of the multiple pieces separately, but

had he built some kind of hardware that could restore some of the data from just a portion of the destroyed device? Using pure gold, of course. Then he had reached the harbor and spotted the retro machine that managed the cargo list. Even if he had not found my name, the data concerning an industrial power source and cooling system would have told him which container was Maxwell's.

For a modern Dwarf, did a cyber attack correspond to the wrath of the gods? As someone using simulators bearing the names of demons, I had to keep that in mind.

“Shall I destroy the target's system files to stop the device?”

“That would leave me to fight over a chainsaw with a perfectly normal and inhumanly-strong Archenemy even if he doesn't have the use of his special skill at the moment! I'd fare worse than in a sumo match against a mountain gorilla!!”

If Erika and Ayumi heard that, they would probably get mad with a “my, my” and a “fuguu” respectively, but it was a fact that a mere human could not hope to overpower an Archenemy. You couldn't judge them based on their apparent body type.

“I'll inform you what your main task is. Your sub task is to buy time. Once you're inside the Hack or Slave mobile device, let's attack his email.”

“As it is encrypted, that will require taking control of the email server rather than the mobile device itself. That will take some time.”

“Don't target the email folder. Access the kanji prediction file for his virtual keyboard. It should store the terms he uses in order of frequency. Search for proper nouns!”

In a way, this was like a malicious key logger installed by the manufacturer. Even if his email was properly encrypted, this file was often left untouched.

“Big data, Wild@Hunt, search, Archenemy, reaction, Hack or Slave, experiment, deposit, home, directly, outsourced, invoice...”

“Use an advertisement emotional prediction algorithm and place those in the order most likely to inspire anxiety.”

The chainsaw Dwarf was right in front of me now. If I was killed, everyone would be placed on the chopping block. Before I was filleted, I checked the list of speech bubbles on the screen, chose the ones I needed, and released my physical voice into the world.

“You failed. The secret data got out.”

“...?”

Still crawling on the ground, I shook my smartphone so he couldn't see the screen.

“I had thought it was odd for Hack or Slave, a major corporation's hacker unit, to be sent out for a case of domestic abuse, but this was an experiment by Wild@Hunt, wasn't it? To see if you could use big data to find the Archenemies blending into normal lives. The unjustified persecution and abuse was no more than something like sonar or radar. You sent out the waves and watched for a reaction. That was all it was. You were looking for wounds that healed differently from a normal human or the use of a power that can't be explained using existing biology or physics.”

I felt goose bumps at my own words.

I still wasn't sure if this was true. I was only piecing together the phrases in the order that would inspire the most anxiety.

But I had a feeling this was pretty accurate.

It went back to the Elf Archenemy named Sakai Iori.

Why had Wild@Hunt chosen her as a target? There had been some reason why it had to be her. And yet there were other people who stood out far more, either in a good way or a bad way.

There were Archenemies in this world. Humans were not the full population of the earth. There was a system for them to register with the government, but there were some who thought they were human like Itou Helen had until recently and others simply did not get around to submitting the paperwork. And the most important fact here was that the conditions were different for humans and Archenemies. For example, a company might use big data to create advertisements for cosmetic and health products, but immortal Archenemies

could not be half-threatened into buying a product using the fear of aging or disease. Wild@Hunt ruled the world using data, so they were trying to completely control even that which existed outside the human side. That was the goal here.

They had caused that fabricated abuse.

They had done it for no other reason than she was tougher than a normal human. If that system became established, that kind of tragedy would repeat again and again as nothing more than a periodic scan!

Meanwhile, the Dwarf looked as pale as I did. However, that Hack or Slave man was probably more concerned about having his client's secret data posted on a message board than he was about the severe moral hazard being carried out by that global corporation.

"What you wanted most of all were repeated experiments. You needed to test it as many times as you could. Sakai Iori the Elf was already registered with the government. You could have found her the normal way, but you went out of your way to search for her this way! ...That fabricated abuse wasn't isolated to that one case. You began with the simple ones and planned to gradually crank up the difficulty. So you could ultimately make a simple search that not even the Archenemy involved knew was happening! How many of those experiments are underway right now in the world!?"

"You're lying! A crawler would never find anything talking about that. Where in the world did you find that data!?"

"The problem isn't where it was posted. The problem is that I know it and your client will know who let me know." I grinned. "If Wild@Hunt learns the leak came from your mobile device, what will their American HQ think? You're just an outsourced hacker group: Hack or Slave. If they start to suspect you were only feigning obedience to steal all their internal data, you will have an awfully hard time ridding them of those doubts. I mean, these are the people who were willing to expose a child to abuse so they could earn even more obscene profits. I doubt your bosses will take kindly to professional traitors."

"...Give me that smartphone."

"I chose this old-fashioned model because I'm quite fond of it. I'd really rather

not have some old guy's oily fingers all over it."

"I'll know the truth if I check that phone! So just hand it here!!"

The Hack or Slave man roared at me and he must have felt the chainsaw alone was not enough. I saw something golden sparkling out of the corner of my eye.

Had he just barely made it in time!?

"Analysis complete. The Dwarf's mobile device has been frequently accessing an industrial printer brought into Kukyou City. It is container sized and designed for printing cardboard models for city planning dioramas."

Oh, so he didn't mess with blueprints or 3D diagrams on the screen. The trigger was the creation of a life-size model in a distant location. That would explain why he couldn't create something as large as a bomber or with complex chemical phenomena like a nuclear bomb.

At any rate, now I could save them.

I could save my precious family and the small Elf girl who was finally restarting her life after suffering from unwarranted violence.

"Make the attack, Maxwell!!"

"Sure."

It only took an instant to end it.

A gale of destruction blew through just 5cm to the side of where the Dwarf stood.

Instead of the spring cannon, it was a spike gun that used the explosive force of a camping propane tank. A metal spike thicker than my thumb was launched 50m and that projectile's weight and speed would leave as brutal a mark as an anti-materiel rifle. ...The plans for one had been easy to find on blogs. If you could translate the English or Russian, you could see some truly insane home research projects.

But.

The supernatural hacker of Hack or Slave must have had no idea what

happened. The weapon that appeared was entirely different from the one he had asked for, he had lost control of it, and it was attacking him instead.

But what he did was send an order from his mobile device to the distant printer and then use his Dwarf power to create an actual weapon based on the cardboard model.

By hacking his mobile device and sending different plans to the printer, I could have him create something else entirely. By doing that just as he was planning to use his power, I could hack his supernatural power!

“Wha-...ah!?”

“This is pretty hard to control. Also, you should probably shut off the chainsaw engine.”

I let him see my smartphone’s screen which displayed targeting crosshairs on the footage from the propane spike gun’s camera.

“If it’s still moving, the broken chain will flail around.”

The second shot hit the side of the chainsaw. The blade portion bent to the side and the chain snapped and did indeed flail around like a snake writhing in pain. The Dwarf’s face was not sliced open because the great force ripped the grip from his hands and sent it flying away from him. The broken power tool flew to the side, began leaking a fluid, and finally burst into flames as the gasoline ignited.

“Gh, hhh...!!”

His fingers must not have escaped unscathed. The Hack or Slave man had dropped his mobile device and he looked down at his hands. They were discolored a bluish-purple.

“Work with me,” I spat out while making sure to keep the distant propane spike gun aimed at him. “The way things are, you will soon be eliminated to silence you. Just like you’ve seen happen to so many people in the past.”

“...”

“I’m not talking about where to direct your resentment. I’m simply saying there’s only one way to survive this. Either you crush Wild@Hunt to release the

pus, or you die.”

I too had a reason to bring down Wild@Hunt.

If that fabricated abuse really was being repeated in randomly-selected experiments all around the world, I couldn't just ignore it. I couldn't accept saving one small Elf as a happy ending!

The Dwarf clenched his teeth and kicked his mobile device toward me. He seemed to have accepted my terms.

“First, I need an environment where I'm free to act.” I picked up the device. “Maxwell, I'll connect this with a cable, so start it up in debug mode. If we activate the tethering option and have it access the internet through my smartphone, we can do the same thing as the infected routers. We should be able to access all of the data he receives.”

“No. Hack or Slave are outsourced staff, so I doubt they will have full access to Wild@Hunt's internal storage.”

“Your prediction still needs work. Hear me out.” I smiled. “Wild@Hunt's weapon is the global big data taken from their business operations. But you can't gather big data by holing up in a shell. They create that giant monster by snatching up data from all sorts of places: police stations, courthouses, city halls, TV stations, newspapers, hospitals, schools, supermarkets, and convenience stores.”

For example, if someone was pulling a certificate of residence out of a convenience store copier to submit it to the city hall, they should keep in mind that the data would remain inside the industrial copier's memory. Convenient services always exposed your data to danger. So should you really resent the effort it took to do it right?

“Oh?” said Maxwell. “In that case...”

“Even if we can't go after Wild@Hunt HQ, the small stores that supply that data use normal Winners with normal Bordon or Astersky. Well, some of them might use fancy Dac desktops with that pear logo on them. The city halls and police will at most have their own servers and a contract with a security company. By swapping out that data and having Wild@Hunt HQ gather

nonsense, they'll lay a rotten golden egg of mistaken big data."

Even if you had 10,000 people take a survey, you couldn't analyze the views of the urban youth if every participant lived in the mountains. You would end up thinking kids in the city wanted boar meat.

So as long as we had a list of what stores Wild@Hunt gathered its data from, we could attack them. And since they were supposedly an outsourced security group, Hack or Slave would have been instructed to take data even from the uncooperative companies. They couldn't do their job without a list of which was which.

"I have found 89 companies and 156 organizations. But even that is likely only his section's share and thus just the tip of the iceberg."

"Now I'm not going to feel comfortable even buying a drink from a vending machine with a camera on it. Okay, Maxwell, let's swap out each company's data to lead Wild@Hunt's supercomputer to a false conclusion."

"What exactly should that be?"

"Let's invent a fictional hacker group that only exists as data. And make sure to leave traces of past activities that show a coherent history if you follow it. Make it so they did Kukyou 1st Broadcasting. No, make it so they're the top suspect for revealing that the fabricated abuse was a Wild@Hunt experiment. And have it look more likely that the data was gathered from everyone instead of just that Dwarf's report. That way I'll be free."

I was already taking on Hack or Slave like this, but this was the Techno Parade hacker festival. It would make perfect sense to assume I had struck back after someone attacked my smartphone based on false suspicion. This was pretty common for the hackers and engineers who came here from all around the globe. ...In fact, they were constantly making benign cyber attacks to communicate with each other or test their strength.

"Task setup complete. Executing..."

"Now Wild@Hunt's elites will be forced to eternally pursue a phantom that never really existed."

Big data was undoubtedly convenient, but blindly trusting it would trip you

up. Even if an individual thought something seemed off, it was hard to overturn an answer reached by a giant computer.

“What should I name the fictional hacker group?” asked Maxwell.

“Choose two English words that are far removed from my tastes.”

“Sure. Then I will go with Possession Spirit.”

This was the first step.

Now that I've freed myself from suspicion, it's time for an all-out attack, Wild@Hunt.

[Support by] Records of Possession Spirit's Activities

[DELTA brain]

Possession Spirit is a hacker group. Opinions are split over whether they are an individual or a group, but the leading theory is that they are a group.

Records of their activities were cleverly hidden, but their first known case was the malfunctioning of an American lobster breeding plant in Fiji. After that, they were involved in crashing the guest records of luxury tourist hotels in South Pacific countries such as Vanuatu or Samoa and in leaking bank data from tax havens.

There are records of them using videos to criticize celebrities in the past (although those videos have all been deleted by the site administrators). Based on the remaining transcripts, they especially hate Western IT companies and tend to advocate an intellectual liberation of the southern hemisphere.

They have never directly targeted Japan, but there is always a risk of being indirectly targeted due to Japan taking stances very similar to America's on many issues.

...I will make a clean copy using this format. Is that okay? (y/n)

Chapter 4

Hi, everyone. It's me, Amatsu Satori.

After putting on an act to fool the global company called Wild@Hunt and escaping to safety, I simply enjoyed the festival with Ayumi, Erika, and Anastasia, so I was worn out. For once, I actually woke up pleasantly rested the following morning, but the pleasant part did not last long.

Amatsu Yurina and Magatsu Taori.

My two moms were facing each other with truly intense smiles first thing in the morning!?

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

It felt like the awkward atmosphere of an elevator concentrated to 700 times the intensity, so I completely froze as soon as I groggily walked into the living room.

I should have known something was wrong when I saw Ayumi hiding back at the stairs when she's usually as bright and cheerful as the midsummer sun.

...Also, what was my dad doing looking all flustered in the dining room!? He was the one that caused this terribly complicated family environment in the first place, so shouldn't he be the one in charge of defusing things here!?

“Oh? Don't you know that the morning is a hellish battlefield of a time for a housewife? Oh, I'm sorry. Maybe a *former* housewife would have forgotten that.”

My stepmom made the first move and she was being really cruel right off the bat!!

“I have retaken my maiden name and left this family, so I will not comment on

his lifestyle here or what you are teaching him.”

But my mom was just as scary in how she let it roll right off her back!!

“But that changes when it is directly related to his safety, you bitch. How can you call yourself a parent when you fail to notice your child is in danger? Well, Archenemy?”

...Hm?

Things were looking dicey. I felt like this was not the time to be getting caught up in a melodramatic soap opera. And why was my life on the chopping block!? This was all about me apparently!!

“Surely you know I am a hunter, monster.”

My mom pulled a paper document out of a small bag and tossed it onto the table.

“This is a top-level bounty notice that has started going around. The reward is even greater than the werewolf that ruled an entire country in Eastern Europe. It went through several intermediaries, but this was almost certainly put out by the monstrous corporation Wild@Hunt. ...So. Why is a human like Satori-chan on a list of monsters needing elimination? Did you really not notice a thing when you live with him? If you really weren’t aware, you can say goodbye to your front teeth, you bitch.”

My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, glared over at me. Was that look criticizing me for bringing this trouble here!?

“B-but it’s all right!”

Oh, how pathetic I was. I wasn’t fit to be a teenage boy if I would give up my pride and produce a cracking voice when my mom put pressure on me. But this was the kind of pressure you would never feel in a normal family!!

“I think that information must be a little outdated. I used Wild@Hunt’s big data against them to make them pursue the wrong culprit: a fictional hacker group called Possession Spirit that I created out of whole cloth. So I doubt they’re still focused on me.”

“In other words, you really were in danger, Satori!?”

“Don’t you blame Satori-chan for this!! The blame falls on you for not being aware of the situation, you bitch!!”

If those two monsters got into a fight, I would be torn to pieces between them, but what could I do when they were bringing up a problem I had already solved!? And I wasn’t going to forget that my dad didn’t intervene to help me!!

Just then, I heard the morning news coming from the living room TV.

“For our next story, the hacker group Possession Spirit has taken credit for a cyber attack.”

Ah?

“Ahhh!? What is this, Maxwell!?”

“No. I played no role in this. I confirmed that no hacker group called Possession Spirit exists before I manipulated the data.”

And yet this was happening.

The announcer continued their report.

“This morning, the group posted online to claim credit for malfunctions in railroad control systems in 7 cities around Kukyou City, causing trains to stop running over a wide area. This will cause major delays during the morning rush area, so...”

“Did someone adopt the name of the fictional hacker group we created?”

“No. The name Possession Spirit should only exist within Wild@Hunt’s mainframe. I doubt your average hacker or a copycat could use the name.”

My two moms were giving me the worst look, but I could not turn back time.

The TV was still talking.

“Also, Possession Spirit has announced they will commit further crimes in the future, so our station has begun investigating under the assumption that there is a connection to the white hacker festival known as the Techno Parade.”

Oh, I see. So Wild@Hunt has not given up on me yet.

Wild@Hunt was the emperor of distribution, so they were developing and supporting various forms of transport infrastructure from railroads, harbors,

and airports to self-driving cars and drone deliveries. So they would know all the weaknesses of those systems.

It looked like Possession Spirit was the top priority here, but it smelled fishy to me. They were almost certainly hoping that I would make a mistake by trying to stop them if they kept using that name to do bad things. Dammit!!

With an Oscar-worthy performance, I said I had to use the bathroom and got up from my seat, but my blood-related mom, Magatsu Taori, attempted a fairly serious tackle to stop me. I somehow managed to dodge that, grabbed my useless dad who was hiding around the corner, and threw him at the two moms pursuing me. It was time he experienced a new kind of soap opera that would never work as a love comedy. In the meantime, I made my way to the bath to escape through the window.

Incidentally, the neighbor's bath was right alongside ours. Just a few meters away, my childhood friend, the forehead glasses Class Rep, was in the middle of her morning ritual.

"Hi. Good morning, Class Rep. This sunny morning is perfect for a morning shampoo, isn't it!?"

"Gyaaahhh!!!???"

The angle made the window only visible from my house, so she had gotten careless. Eh heh heh. It was cute that the only thing that flew my way was a bar of soap and a rubber ducky. And she kept her glasses on even in the bath! That was a perfect 100! A perfect 100 with no room for complaint!!

"S-S-Satori-kun, what are you doing out in your pajamas first thing in the morning!?"

"I have a request while you have the window open with only glasses and soap bubbles to cover your naked body first thing in the morning: can I borrow a change of clothes?"

I was not asking for girl's clothes here. The Class Rep still kept a change of my clothes and a pair of my shoes in her house. ...That was a remnant of when I would escape there during the mess of the divorce.

She ducked back into the changing room, hurried footsteps rang through the

house, and she came back with a blush on her face to give me some boy's clothes and a slap.

While I changed behind cover, the Class Rep (who wore a uniform with her hair still wet) tilted her head.

"Huh? But, Satori-kun, how can you go to school dressed like that?"

"..."

"That silence. You're surprised I only now caught on, aren't you!? D-d-don't you go anywhere!!"

When she rushed around to where I was, she found me in Greek statue mode since I had not finished changing yet, but that was not my intention. She was the one that forced her way in, so it doesn't count!!

"Waaahhh!?"

I made a point of striking a pose to burn an incredible image into her memory, but then it was time to get down to business: run away!!

"User, I think half of you is the absolute worst."

"As long as the other half is the best, it averages out."

"Correction: all of you is the absolute worst."

"Besides, the Class Rep is fitter than she looks, so I would never escape if I just tried to run away."

Sure enough, she had already recovered from the sudden Satori shock and had locked onto me. Damn, it was going to take another hit to shake her.

"Ha ha ha. If you're going to chase after people at full speed, you should really wear a longer skirt! Thanks for the nice view!!"

"...!?"

I had won as soon as she frantically pressed her legs together and held down her skirt. I managed to lose her.

"You are the worst," said Maxwell.

"Please, enough flattery."

I came to a stop and caught my breath.

“Looks like we managed to lose my moms too. So how about we shift into battle mode? Let’s get a major blow in on Wild@Hunt for making these indiscriminate attacks in the guise of Possession Spirit, the fictional hacker group we invented.”

I chatted with Maxwell while walking toward the ocean.

“The exact number and locations have not been made public, but Wild@Hunt has central servers in approximately 140 countries or regions. By gathering all the transaction data from the corresponding country and then sharing it with the other servers, they can deal in big data from around the world.”

“I’m aware,” I said.

To avoid various forms of conflict or information theft, they supposedly used nondescript buildings with no sign to identify them. Yes, supposedly. There were a lot of online rumors spread by people who claimed to work for them, but none of it sounded very convincing.

Also...

“Rumor has it Japan has a central server, but it’s always under maintenance, right?” I asked. “And the claim is that foreign divisions do the work instead?”

“There’s always something with Japan, isn’t there?”

“Well, the decision would have been made by the foreign company.”

We of course wanted information from pretty deep inside Wild@Hunt. That meant we would want full access to all the giant corporation’s data at some point.

“It is not known where Japan’s data is processed, but their defenses are solid and there is only so much we can do from Kukyou City without physical access.”

“If we can’t sneak inside, we just have to get them to bring the treasure out to us,” I said casually. “There has to be a Wild@Hunt distribution center here in Kukyou City. First, we sneak in there and acquire the format file for the reports sent to the central server. If we send a virus to the central server through the

official internal route, it will give us all the countless pieces of data collected from the 140 areas.”

And even without the Possession Spirit incident, I still wanted the secret data handled by Wild@Hunt’s central servers. If they were repeating horrific fabricated abuse incidents around the world for their experiments, then I needed a list of those so I could free everyone from that cage of big data.

The distribution center we wanted was among the warehouses along the coast. It was four times the size of a school gym. That was an incredible size for a single building, but it must not have been enough for Wild@Hunt who had taken root in every corner of the world.

The many items that crossed the ocean and arrived at the port were divided up and loaded onto trucks or drones for delivery to the houses that had ordered them.

Now.

“Security is strict,” warned Maxwell.

“I know.”

If they were minimizing personnel expenses and shipping time, they would be using robot carts to divide up all the packages. On a TV program that visited different workplaces, I had seen footage of carts faster and heavier than your average scooter zipping around every which way like a giant’s loom. There had only been a few human workers who would deal with any errors where the address could not be read by what amounted to a post office’s postcard-sorting system. The security would likely be mostly left to cameras and sensors...but I was just a high school kid. I wasn’t naïve enough to think I could make it deep inside the building.

“But what if I don’t actually have to get inside the building? I bet I can make it over that fence.”

There were containers and wooden boxes stacked up around the outside of the building, so there were a lot of blind spots for the fixed cameras. They had far too few human guards out on patrol for the overall area, so I effectively had a free pass. It didn’t look like I would be spotted as long as I did not use the

entrances and exits that were covered by the cameras and sensors.

Of course, everything important was inside the building. I couldn't acquire anything by hanging around outside. The distribution center's server room only had online access for a few dozen seconds at a time, so what I had to steal was likely the hardware key that the supervisor inserted into the USB port before making their official report. Without that, I could not make a cyber attack on the central server that was synced with the other 140 areas and was borrowed from some other country.

I was here to take that magic wand.

"There."

I started by going as far as I could.

I climbed over the chain-link fence and followed Maxwell's guidance to stay within the cameras' blind spots while I circled around to the back of the building.

"What are you going to do?"

"Make this flashy."

We already had the layout of the facility.

The building was four times the size of a school gym, but the server room and employee office were all located at one end. As was common in foreign buildings, it was prefabricated with the walls, floor, and ceiling inserted into the six faces of a container-like frame. ...As expected, it was an incredible rush job. Had the other rooms been added into the large box afterwards? From the outside, I could see the bolts used to attach them.

"Here and here. This column...yes, and this bolt."

...And this was a bad move on their part. Was it a steamroller? With a drive assist system? That essentially made it self-driving. They must have not seen the harm since it was on private property and not the public roads. It was not just the customers who ended up with a bunch of empty boxes after buying things online. The machine was probably used to crush the wooden boxes so they could reuse the materials, but I could also use it.

“If we can’t sneak in, we just have to get them to come out. Maxwell, take control of that steamroller.”

“Sure. What are you doing with that wire?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m attaching it to that and this.”

Once the preparations were complete, it was time to get started.

I hid behind a wooden box a short distance away and gave the order into my smartphone.

“Maxwell, send the steamroller forward at top speed! Use the wire to pull out the server room!!”

The next thing that happened was a giant explosion.

A metal wire thicker than my thumb was used to pull a prefabricated container room right out through the thin wall. The steamroller broke through the chain-link fence and the wheel-less room’s floor scraped along the ground, sending orange sparks flying as it began a journey like Santa’s sleigh.

Needless to say, that was the heart of the facility: the server room that tracked and managed the IC tags containing all of the packages’ shipping information.

...Technically speaking, I had attached the wire to the bolts and metal framework that stuck out of the building and pulled out the small building along with them.

“Wha-...ah!? What the hell!?”

“After it! Just chase after it!”

Just as the few workers and guards panicked, I made another attack.

“Maxwell, the office this time. Pull the whole thing out!!”

The exact same thing happened again. When the second steamroller moved, it stole an entire small room that broke through the giant facility’s wall. And the manager with the crucial hardware key was still inside that room.

“Buy time by driving those around town without causing any accidents.”

“I can do that, but doing this will put the synced central servers on alert and

they will cut off all access. The hardware key hanging from that supervisor's neck will be frozen and a new one will be distributed."

"But they'll use a normal signal to swap out the contents of the hardware key. Intercept that signal with my smartphone and we'll have the same free pass for ourselves."

Of course, without that magic wand, it would last a few days at most and it was possible a new key file was written with each use. That might sound quite secure, but frequently swapping it out required frequently transmitting it and that meant more chances for someone to interfere.

With the exception of extremely directional signals, wireless transmission were generally open to all. Set up an antenna in the corresponding area and anyone could receive it.

"I don't know how often Wild@Hunt replaces their key files and we can't just wait around for a few days. But that just means making an emergency that requires they swap it out now."

The workers had no idea what had happened and began climbing into their company cars to pursue the stolen rooms.

"I have intercepted 1008 different electronic signals in the area. I have found one that resembles the format of a hardware key. The digital publisher is listed as Wild@Hunt US Headquarters and it is a set encryption key made to look like a never-ending formula such as pi."

"Okay, today is looking good."

Needless to say, it would not be this easy without a special system like Maxwell. I simply walked out of the deserted grounds.

If you were the kind of hard-headed person who would obediently head to the deepest area when told the treasure was hidden in the thick safe, you just weren't cut out for this kind of work. You needed to be flexible enough to lie and say keeping the treasure in the safe would cause moisture damage in order to trick them into removing it from the safe themselves.

"Use the hardware key to gain full access to the central server."

“I have successfully entered the Wild@Hunt central server at their India Division’s New Delhi Office.”

“Ind-...? Why there!?”

“The office was rapidly built based on predictions of a population explosion, but growth was lower than expected and it had extra capacity leftover. Also, Japan’s population is only about 10% of theirs.”

“...So we’re treated like a rounding error?”

“All of the central servers use the same authorization, so I can access all data from each of the 140 countries and regions.”

I entered a chain café a short distance away, ordered a random coffee, and took a seat. They did not seem very busy at this time of day.

“Insert a backdoor just in case.”

That might seem overly complicated, but two identical keys should not exist. The supervisor had to be too confused to do anything while the entire room was dragged around along with them, but once they calmed down, they might get suspicious and freeze the key.

And with a new backdoor, no one would be monitoring the login status or the flow of data, so I would have full access without worrying about the account being frozen or our signal being traced. It was a pain, but better safe than sorry.

“Once the processing is complete, abandon the hardware key and re-access it through the backdoor.”

“Sure. I have successfully switched over.”

That meant there was nothing to fear.

There were two things I wanted: A list of the people randomly selected for the fabricated abuse experiments held around the globe and the identity of the person using our fictional hacker group’s name to cause trouble.

“I have found the list of experiment subjects. There are 512 in all and it appears they were intentionally selected from different regions and cultures to cover different patterns.”

“So they’ve been causing that much suffering to increase the accuracy of their experiments, have they? And all to make the meaningless distinction between human and Archenemy. Can you end it right away?”

“Sure. I can immediately create holes in the isolation that creates the vicious cycle within the family. As just one example, simply altering the security map to add a security camera to a streetlight near the subject’s home should cause a dramatic change. It would take less than two hours for the work to complete.”

“Take care of it.”

Now I just had to monitor the progress of the fabricated abuse. I made sure I was alerted if any of them showed no sign of improvement and then I could deal with them individually.

That left one other task: the Possession Spirit incident.

“I have discovered the name mentioned by an advertising agency affiliated with Wild@Hunt. It appears to be an expert’s opinion on how to induce negative emotions in the general public.”

“But an advertisement adviser wouldn’t know how to make cyber attacks. Even if Wild@Hunt assisted in the development of the railroad infrastructure that was targeted, the actual criminal would need the knowledge necessary to take advantage of the vulnerabilities. Who did the hiring and who was hired? I want to know the answer to both questions. If I don’t crush them both, this would leave a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Sure. At least on the surface, I see nothing that seems related to a hacker group.”

“It has to be there somewhere. They’ll probably have some arbitrary title like ‘security department’ or something.”

“I have found it. A non-executive director has a history that fits the bill: Adjust Rex. He is an engineering specialist, but there are some questionable points in the data on his birth, nationality, and educational history. Plus, by following the money through several bank accounts, I can tell that he was given a million dollars soon before and soon after the timing of the railroad infrastructure attack. Although it is disguised as a collection of small rebates so that the

payment method would not be discovered even if the ultimate recipient was determined.”

“So half paid up front and half after? Let’s focus on him.”

Adjust Rex.

That sounded like a fake name. Perhaps paired with a social security number that shouldn’t actually exist.

Regardless, everything before this had been handled by Hack or Slave with their supernatural hacker. They had been treated like a subcontractor, but now we were looking at someone with the authority to influence the company’s management. Even if he was only a non-executive director, he had to be highly prized if Wild@Hunt kept a hacker in that position.

“Have you found anything on Possession Spirit? What about Adjust’s personal storage? ...No, I guess you wouldn’t be able to get into that.”

“User, giving up before performing a benchmark test sounds like an unwarranted insult to me.”

“You’re not a pure hacking machine. You’re a disaster environment simulator being used that way. It’s like the difference between beating someone up with a torch and swinging an executioner’s axe down at them. The specialized tool is going to do the better job.”

“ ... ”

“Don’t just reply with dots, Maxwell. Besides, why do you even need to have a complex about this? All an axe can do is kill, but a torch can illuminate the darkness or light a house on fire. Both sound more impressive to me.”

Anyway, our target was like a mountain cottage in a blizzard with a skilled hunter holed up inside. And that hunter had been polishing his rifle all the while. Forcing our way in through the front door could easily get us filled with holes. And we didn’t want a duel that left both sides dead.

If he was going to die, he could do it on his own.

So I had to come up with a trick that the hunter would not expect.

“...Maxwell, the backdoor is still in effect, right?”

“Sure. I am still capable of accessing all of Wild@Hunt’s data from the central server at their New Delhi Office.”

“Then logout for now. Let’s go at this from a different angle.”

“Which angle is that?”

“The malfunctioning railroad management infrastructure.”

Yes.

The railroad infrastructure around Kukyou City really had been hacked on a large scale. But how had they known Possession Spirit was really behind it? Had some kind of trace data been left at the site?

An online video claiming responsibility was not enough to go on. Hackers were generally anonymous, so they were good at pretending to be someone else.

I made my way to the busy train station, slipped to the side of the crowd pushing at the station workers, and worked my way deeper into the station building. I moved my smartphone close to the handheld device attached to the waist of a middle-aged man in a yellow helmet and jumpsuit with reflective tape on it and I used a short-range wireless signal to steal some information. That gave me accurate data on the extent of the damage and the progress of repairs.

“It appears the train service’s car spacing management system was illegitimately accessed. As far as they know, there are 32 derailments, 4 crashes, and 3 trains stopped on a bridge or in a tunnel. Fortunately, none of them was too serious, so there are injuries but no deaths.”

“That was intentional. Wild@Hunt wants to indirectly attack me by giving Possession Spirit a bad name, but they don’t want to do any irreparable damage to their railroad infrastructure’s reputation.”

Sneaking into a major railroad management system was tricky, but I just had to contact the terminal sensors to determine whether there had been any illegitimate accesses or virus infections. I attached my smartphone to a selfie stick, held it down toward the track situated a level lower than the platform, and got it just a few centimeters away from a device embedded between the

rails. It used IR.

“Malicious software detected. Based on the structure, it appears to be a derivative of the harmless Weather Alert virus, but it had malicious elements added in.”

“So he collected and modified Anastasia’s virus?”

“The digital publisher is listed as ‘(ノ㏓)Possession Spirit (*’㏓`*)㏓’, so even a moron could tell who was behind it.”

Anastasia saw herself as a white hacker who sent harmless viruses to individual, corporate, or government users who had failed to update their systems to warn them of the vulnerabilities that left open.

If she knew someone had modified her virus to cause all this damage and all to strike back at a personal friend of hers...

“...We have to keep this a secret from her. It would make her so mad.”

And there was no way things would end well if she let the blood rush to her head. Making a rash attack was exactly what Adjust Rex would want.

This was going to take a while, so I entered a convenient burger shop. I was not hungry after using that café earlier, so I just ordered some fries and sat at one of the nearly-empty shop’s booth seats. ...I wouldn’t be in the way when they were this empty, would I?

“Maxwell, save and quarantine a sample of the virus. Analyze the source in virtual space.”

“But this is no more than a copy of Miss Anastasia’s Weather Alert.”

“The malicious part is his original. Maxwell, copy that dangerous code and create a new virus. Yes, and erase a character from the malicious portion so it will trigger an error. It doesn’t actually have to cause damage. Once it’s ready, login to the central server in...India was it? Anyway, login there and send it to all of Wild@Hunt’s internal networks around the world. Everything from the giant satellites to the tiny pet robots.”

“Sure.”

“Which devices detected it in advance and blocked it?”

“Only one machine did so.”

“Then that’s Adjust’s hacking machine.”

Not many people could detect and react to an unknown virus sent from within a supposedly secure system. It was safe to assume this was either a miracle hacker from a movie or the creator.

“Where exactly is this hacking machine?”

“It is Experimental Processor #3 in Wild@Hunt’s Distribution Management AI Lab in Texas. Basically, it is a collection of parallel processing machines inside a giant refrigerated warehouse in the middle of the desert.”

“But his workshop is inside there. It has to contain data proving he modified Anastasia’s harmless virus and used it to frame us.”

“No. The firewall is strict and I doubt we can retrieve data from it using any normal means.”

“...Maxwell, is there anyone inside that facility?”

“It generally only uses fixed cameras and patrolling drones, so security and maintenance personnel are only allowed in when an emergency signal goes out.”

Then I didn’t have to worry.

Attacking the thick firewall might be difficult, but attacking the people who used it was a different matter.

“Maxwell, fake a maintenance manual written by Adjust.”

“Who is supposed to read this manual?”

“Cause an electrical fire to have their firefighting team sent in. With such a large facility where normal water won’t be enough to put out most fires, I doubt they would use the local fire department. Wild@Hunt should have their own disaster response team there.”

“What should the fake manual say?”

“Have them attach a mobile device to the internal machine to perform a system check after the electrical fire is put out. They’ll think they’re confirming

the safety of the system while actually sending a ton of secret data out to the external internet.”

“Wow. It’s like the world’s largest ATM scam.”

In a vertical society of near-absolute orders, it was easy to fool the individuals who were discouraged from asking questions.

And even if the system as strictly protected from external attack, the hurdle was lowered significantly when a mobile device was hooked up. That mobile device would act as a Dejima-like contact point and we would only have to deal with the ordinary commercial firewall on that device.

“Good, good, good...”

The chaos we wanted had begun on the other side of the planet and all the data was pouring into our hands. I was afraid the free online storage wouldn’t be enough. But after spreading that virus via the central server, I doubted I could keep using that backdoor much longer.

There would be no second chance here.

I had to finish it here.

And just as I thought that, someone stood up from the seat on the other side of the thin partition behind me.

...Wait.

A speech bubble appeared from Maxwell who could see over my shoulder using the smartphone’s camera.

“Warning!! It is Adjust Rex himself!!”

But a dull sound burst in my head before I could finish reading it.

A stun...gun?

Had he pressed the electrodes against my head? It was more nauseating than painful. I felt like I was going to puke. I could not support my own weight and I collapsed onto the table in front of me.

“...Ugh.”

What?

Am I being dragged along something...yes, something cold and hard?

Where am I?

What happened to me?

Was my smartphone taken? Are Maxwell and the data linking back to my family safe?

“The atmosphere of a restaurant changes depending on the regular customers. You should have given more consideration to the location. This is near the company-owned homes, so about 70% of the customers work for Wild@Hunt. It’s a perfectly normal chain, but the product management is lax and they serve more fries than the others. I’m quite fond of it.”

...Adjust Rex.

He was a large white man with graying blonde hair slicked back. The middle-aged man wore a worn-out summer coat over a luxury suit, but presumably to avoid exposure to the sun rather than to keep him warm. He had the look of a dirty cop instead of a corporate director. He looked like someone who would follow the rules but would use those rules to hurt people and profit from it.

Glaring at him was pointless. My hands were tied behind my back with...was it a plastic zip tie? And even if my hands were free, I was just a high school kid. While unarmed and without Maxwell’s assistance, I seriously doubted I could defeat a grown man armed with a stun gun.

I had been brought into a windowless room with a tile floor and silver cooking equipment. It was probably the kitchen in the back of the restaurant.

“Welcome to my castle, cockroach boy.”

“...This can’t be possible. Even if you’re a regular, the workers would never just let you carry a stun gun around and drag a kid into the back! You couldn’t just bribe someone into overlooking that!!”

Adjust said nothing in response. He simply glanced over at an extra-large industrial fridge.

...Wait.

Don't tell me.

I realized that I had not seen anyone else after coming to, even though I had been dragged into the back of the restaurant. I should have at least heard something!!

“I took a look at your smartphone. A Pearphone Version 8 Omega? Specifically a high spec older model? A tasteful choice. I have to appreciate that.”

“Your hacking machine in Texas has been laid bare. Your exhibitionist girl has shamelessly opened the trench coat to show off all her secret data.”

“And it is quite well trained. It seems your guide program does not obey just anyone's instructions if they use your phone. So the whole device was destroyed before I could check on the data inside. And I don't mean the data was wiped. No, the lithium-ion battery detonated and just about blew off my fingers! Ha ha!!”

“Possession Spirit's identity will be revealed before long! Your fortress has already crumbled away!!”

“None of that matters. ...Have you forgotten? I only took on Possession Spirit's identity to lure you out from the depths of the network. That was all it was.”

“You were always planning to use that entire Texas facility as bait? Do you have any idea how much something like that has to cost?”

“About fifty billion dollars. Which I suppose would be about 4.9 trillion Japanese yen by today's rate. Quite cheap if you think of it as the war costs necessary to bury your enemy.”

...That amount of money was on the level of items in a national budget.

“Now. cockroach boy. That sums up my situation here, but what about you? As you can see, your precious smartphone was blown to pieces by its own battery. You can no longer speak with that computer you made like a gloomy Japanese otaku.”

I heard a metallic sound.

What was that on the countertop? I had my hands tied behind my back while I

lay on the tile floor, so I could not see up there. But I knew it couldn't be anything good.

...When you got down to it, this was the Calamity from which my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, was trying to save a select few using Absolute Noah.

It was the ultimate moral hazard in which people did not see each other as people. And she had feared the moment at which this occurred simultaneously around the world on a large enough scale to swallow up the planet. That was why my stepmom had wanted to fill that ark with people who possessed a strong enough heart to fight back against Bright Cross's rampage instead of seeing the Colosseum and resigning themselves to the assumption that there was nothing they could do about it.

That day was apparently approaching fast.

So it was not surprising if some people were already being affected by it. It was not surprising to come across someone who would do the unthinkable.

"4.9 trillion yen is a lot of money. That is how much it cost to track you down. It is true that's cheap in terms of war costs."

Yes.

Just like Adjust Rex who had trapped someone in a restaurant kitchen and was examining the cooking tools without giving a single thought to the consequences.

"But it's quite a lot for killing a single person, don't you think?"

[Support by] Kukyou City's International Reputation

[DELTA brain]

Kukyou City is a constant leader in the field of disaster research, so it is known to receive more attention from companies and countries than from normal people. Of course, when the deals are on the level of city infrastructure, large sums of money are riding on their success or failure, so the city management is very high-risk, high-return and a few mayors and city councilors have resigned midterm for unnatural reasons such as anxiety.

And as a way of showing off its excellent disaster-prevention systems, Kukyou City actively welcomes businesses that manage and store valuable commodities such as art or classified data.

In recent years, the unstable weather conditions brought on by global warming have increased the perceived value of the city and some experts are beginning to identity it as an “unwanted demand” just like police, firefighters, and hospitals.

Chapter 5

I had lost my smartphone, but Maxwell was still alive. Maxwell was actually in a distant container and the smartphone was only a tool used to communicate with that.

I couldn't fall for Adjust's tricks.

It could be an IoT oven, the internal phone on the wall, or the radio clock that accurately kept the time. I didn't know where, but Maxwell had to still be watching and listening. She just lacked a mouth, so I could not hear her words.

"Give up. You can't break those zip ties by shaking your hands around. Futile effort will only hurt your wrists."

"..."

Why hadn't he just killed me?

To provide even more pain and fear? To ask me something?

If it was not either of those...

If you could not get in with an external attack, you only needed to wait for them to come out.

...Dammit, I had done that myself countless times!

"Now, what to do?"

Adjust's thick fingers crawled along the countertop where I could not see.

"What would be the most efficient way of making you scream? A knife or meat tenderizer would be too boring. Stabbing every last inch of your body with forks or beating the snot out of you with a frying pan isn't interesting enough. Oh, right. The fries here are good. I wonder if the oil is at a nice temperature."

"...Are you after my stepmom? Are you after a ticket onto Absolute Noah?"

“Just to be clear, you were the one that attacked first here, you cockroach! All I am asking for is repayment for my losses. That’s a basic right.”

...So he wanted to start the negotiations by pouring boiling oil on me in front of a camera?

“Do you really think Wild@Hunt will let you get away with this? You’ve dragged their company name through all this so you alone could survive, so they’ll never just let you go!”

“Wild@Hunt’s management!? Who gives a shit!?”

He shouted back at me and my mind went blank. ...What did he just say? Was this just the ravings of a madman???

“I was a non-executive director. A brat who lives on his parents’ dime wouldn’t understand, but that means they wouldn’t give me a seat at the table. Even though it was me that gave that monster corporation so much growth in a single generation!”

“ ...”

“They don’t know how to make money, they don’t know how to make connections, and all they do is earn resentment. How do you think they ended up at the top of a major corporation? ...Because they could get reservations at a certain Pennsylvania restaurant.”

I had no idea what he meant.

But I couldn’t bring myself to speak up. He seemed calm, but I sensed the ominous ripples of an eruption waiting to happen.

“The jazz stage is covered in dust after years sitting unused and the golf simulator is outdated and yellowed. Just eight people is enough to fill every seat and, worst of all, the food is terrible. ...But only the people who can get a reservation and freely enter that packed restaurant can obtain the star of a winner.”

That was likely a different set of rules than the ark.

He was talking about a fruitless world that we could never reach.

“The world is full of those things. Skill and funding don’t matter. It could be a

suit tailor, a luxury car dealership, a yacht club, WQF Airline's royal first class, or a rifle club... If you can fit inside those purposefully cramped categories, you get your star. And it's only once you've gathered 50 of those stars – one for each state – that you're part of the true privileged class."

He must not have reached that level.

...Was that it?

"Do you know what happened to Absolute Noah 04 at Las Vegas's Hoover Dam?"

"..."

That had been like a water purification filter where my stepmom had used a mistaken selection test to eliminate the black-hearted VIPs.

"An invitation arrived for our top executives. And I warned them! So what do you think happened? They all resented me! They said I had stolen their ticket to salvation!"

"You..."

"And yet they didn't take their handgun from their portable safe with unpracticed hand. Nor did they hire an assassin. ...What do you think they're doing as the world ends? I can only imagine they're knocking at the door of that same Pennsylvania restaurant. Because that's all they've got!"

If that was true, then it was like they had washed up on a desert island with only the duralumin case they had desperately stuffed with cash. They had failed to take into account the environment to an almost comical extent.

"They never stop being a disappointment."

"..."

"So I'm done with those empty shells. I'm through with chasing after them. I'll continue forward on my own. Even if that means using the ark as a stepping stone."

...Had Maxwell realized what was happening?

No, Maxwell would have contacted someone else to come save me

regardless.

It could be my stepmom Amatsu Yurina, Erika the Vampire, Ayumi the Zombie, Anastasia the Hacker, or even Itou Helen the Witch or Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf.

I couldn't predict who would take the bait. And when I was the bait, I couldn't just let it happen!

"...Give up, Adjust. No one will come for me."

"The ark's rules are, at the very least, better than that terrible Pennsylvania restaurant. If Amatsu Yurina is trying to guide you to the ark, there has to be a reason why."

"She just wants to protect her family! But if going after me would cause it all to fall apart, she would protect my dad and my sisters instead!"

"I wouldn't be so sure. Just how useful would it be to have someone whose emotions can persuade the people around them? That might be the masterpiece of the whole ark."

"I already told her I wasn't interested!"

I pressed my hands on the floor and used my legs like a spring to hop up from the tile floor.

Yes, even though my hands were supposedly zip tied behind my back.

"Wha-...!?"

Adjust stepped back in confusion, but it wasn't anything that amazing. Zip ties weren't metal handcuffs. They were made of plastic, so they were weak to heat. Even without some sharp scissors or a knife, I could reduce its strength with the frictional heat of rubbing it over and over against something sticking out from the wall. And it's such a boring solution that you never see it in movies or dramas!

Stepping back had been a mistake.

While choosing his toy, he had approached the fryer for making fries, so I didn't even need to grab a weapon from the countertop. I threw all my weight at his thick chest with a tackle!!

...Stepping back was where you messed up. If you had kept your feet on the floor and tried to hold your ground, your bigger frame might have been able to stop my tackle.

“Gyah.”

He had no time to use his stun gun.

Adjust lost his balance and the hand holding the stun gun plunged into that bubbling sea of oil.

“G-g-g-g-gy-gy-

gyaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

In what I could only assume was a burst of adrenaline-fueled strength, a swing of his other arm sent me flying through the air. I cleared the central countertop and crashed back-first into the wall, knocking the breath out of me.

“Ah...agh...aghghgh...”

Adjust finally pulled his arm from the fryer full of oil, but it didn’t look like the elbow or wrist joints could move anymore. His melted clothing was tangled around the arm and I smelled an intense mixture of fried food and melted plastic.

What happened next I doubt he did on purpose. Either his fingers convulsed or the heat caused the muscles to contract. Whatever the reason, the fried stun gun’s switch was activated and the oily device scattered bluish-white sparks.

It was dramatic.

That was the only word I could find to describe how the red flames traveled up his arm. Some sparks also fell into the fryer and a pillar of fire rose from it.

An invisible wall of heat slammed into my face.

“Gh...”

If I stayed there, I would be caught in the flames too.

Heat, light, and smoke. Even while pursued by so many things, I rushed to the industrial fridge. The employee had gone missing and Adjust had given that fridge a meaningful glance. I breathed in, stopped, and then opened the door.

I found a half-frozen person there.

The young man had his hands zip tied behind him, but he was still alive. Whether Adjust ever planned to let him out was still a mystery, though. I pulled him out while making sure his skin had not frozen to the wall and then we really did run out of the kitchen.

Black smoke was already billowing into the main area of the restaurant.

“Cough, cough!”

The two of us practically rolled out and then left the restaurant altogether.

But the threat was not yet over.

Something was racing through the sky.

I thought it was a passenger plane, but then I realized it was far too close. I ducked down at the shockwave that passed by overhead.

“Was that a Wild@Hunt unmanned delivery plane?”

The part-timer worker’s comment sent a chill down my spine.

And after following that ridiculous course, the plane left something behind like a contrail. There were a lot of them. They were delivery drones with six wings and something like a crane game’s hook. And there were a lot of them!! A hundred? A thousand!? More!!?

Each individual one seemed like a harmless toy, but that changed when there were this many. The two of us fled back into the smoky restaurant as the swarm of drones approached. We escaped danger by getting inside, but that just meant they targeted an onlooker calmly using his phone to film the fire.

“Eh?”

They grabbed his shoulders.

They grabbed his chest, back, head, and thighs... More and more delivery drones used their crane arms to grab flesh and clothing before flying upwards with surprising ease.

The person vanished from sight and only his voice remained.

“Are you kidding me!? What the hell is this!?”

If I was remembering correctly, each delivery drone could only carry 5 kilograms. But with that many of them, they were strong enough to carry an entire person.

With a dull sound, a large mass fell onto the roof of a car parked on the side of the road. He had probably fallen because he struggled in midair, but that was the drones' weapon. They had transformed height into a deadly weapon!?

"Hey, can we even escape from those things...?"

"They aren't just after us? They'll attack anyone walking outside!?"

While we discussed that, I used a burning piece of wood to melt the part-timer's zip tie until he could break it.

...Did they not follow us in here because the fire and smoke made them designate it a dangerous area? Or did they not have indoor flight routines since they were designed as delivery drones that carried packages through the sky to reach specific addresses? ...I seemed to recall that they delivered to the landlord's office at apartments, so they could not pass through auto-locking gates and climb the stairs or elevator to reach the door of an individual unit?

But we received an answer from an unexpected source.

Someone stepped out of the door to the flame-filled kitchen.

"Yes, we had entered the countdown to the Calamity whether I did anything or not."

"Adjust Rex..."

I couldn't believe it.

The right half of his body was still enveloped in flames and he was burned badly enough that his summer coat and luxury suit had melted to his body. How in the world was he still standing!?

"But if Wild@Hunt uses its international influence to intentionally destroy the world's balance, the limit will arrive all the sooner."

"The world's...balance? Intentionally destroy it!?"

"Did you think the things happening right in front of you are all there is to the

world? Yes, this is happening all across the globe! The world must be covered with drones providing this new service! Thanks to the miracle of automation!!”

I didn’t know what he meant.

We stared at him like he was a madman, but he did not seem to care. He spread his arms toward heaven while burning like a human torch.

“Did you hear that, Amatsu Yurina!? Did you hear that, Absolute Noah!? Prepare your ark already! Guide its masterpiece to the entrance! You need this for your closed salvation, don’t you!? The world has mere seconds left!!”

I didn’t know if that was true. Was the world really filled with Wild@Hunt drones that swarmed around and dropped people and cars from the sky?

But I did know he was the center of it all. I tried to grab a nearby fire extinguisher so I could hit him with it.

As soon as I touched it, I felt the pain of pressing my palm against a scorching frying pan.

“Hot!?”

“Yes, Amatsu Satori. Reality is cruel.”

And I lost everything in that moment. Adjust lifted me by the throat with his unburnt left arm. The lack of blood to my head must have been why my vision rapidly narrowed.

“Kah...!?”

“I used my unharmed left hand in order to negotiate.”

The part-timer young man let out a pathetic scream and ran out into the vortex of drones. I couldn’t tell what happened to him. There might as well have been swarms of Zombies and Vampires walking through Kukyuu City.

“Now I will take my time and press my right hand against you. I will use this burning right hand to slowly roast you from the extremities first. The destruction of the masterpiece is the destruction of the ark. You just have to pray Amatsu Yurina makes her move sooner rather than later.”

“Adjust...!!”

That was when it happened.

A large semi truck crashed through the restaurant.

There was nothing sane about it. It didn't even crash through the entrance; it broke through the side wall. But thanks to that, I was safe. It targeted Adjust alone, so the very edge of extra-large bumper cleanly hit him.

"Ugh, cough!!"

I held my throat and choked while something moved inside the truck and the passenger door flew open.

And inside I found...

"Satori, get in! Hurry!!"

"Mom!?"

That was fast!? How long has it even been since the threat!? My beautiful stepmom could be so immature. She apparently intended to talk about it more later, so I dragged my confused self into the passenger seat.

Something was squirming on the other side of the windshield.

"Adjust Rex. A-are you kidding me!?"

With the container on the back, the truck had to weigh nearly 20 tons. It wasn't that I wanted Amatsu Yurina to be a murderer, but how could he get up after a direct hit from that!?

"Even the lower-ranked Hack or Slave had a supernatural hacker."

After the flames and impact, his summer coat and luxury suit crumbled away. And something else came off below that.

Are those an excessive number of bandages? No. No, wait. Is that...!?

"A Mummy... He was an Archenemy!?"

Humans and Archenemies were the same. The undead could perform evil deeds just as much as humans.

"You understand what this means, don't you?" he said. "My body was injected with everything required to eternally preserve a pharaoh's body as a

container for his next life. Did you really think the heat and impacts of this life could truly harm it!?”

But my stepmom paid him no heed.

One of her jobs must have been complete as soon as she had retrieved me, her son. Her shapely butt rose up and returned to the driver’s seat while she happily wiped sweat from her brow.

“But mummies require that pain-in-the-ass process because they’re afraid of *a certain something* affecting the preservation of the corpse.”

She gave an extremely coldhearted smile.

“Namely, moisture. And isn’t it about time for the sprinklers to activate in here?”

Large drops of rain pounded on the windshield.

And my stepmom did not even check to see how he reacted. She violently grabbed the shift lever, but to my surprise, she sent the gigantic truck forward.

Water weakened him.

Immediately after making that announcement, she mercilessly took advantage of that weakness.

With a loud noise, the large semi truck broke through the wall opposite the one it had come in through. It knocked aside a few light cars parked on the curb and entered the road. No one bothered to check what had happened to Adjust.

I heard the roar of propellers and a ton of drones started to fill the door window right next to me.

“Wah!?”

“Don’t worry, Satori. We might be in trouble with a standard 4-door, but there’s no way they can lift a semi truck.”

The ridiculous Hollywood scale of her entrance had apparently had a real reason behind it.

But I couldn’t relax.

“...They’re everywhere overhead.”

It was like the sandstorm I had seen in Las Vegas. A collection of black dots arrived from one end of the blue sky with enough density to nearly block out the light of the sun.

That was frightening, but we couldn't just give up. I found a car navigation system affixed to a stand. Instead of the recent variety that filled the car stereo space, it was a portable one the size of a card. It was a bit like a smartphone that was slow to react to my touch. ...So I did kind of want to argue that a smartphone GPS map app would be better.

Anyway, I was fortunate to find an internet-connected device.

"Maxwell, respond if you can hear me. Stop any form of tracking and use this as your base station."

"Sure, understood."

"Eh?" said my stepmom. "This thing is still giving away my position? But I switched off the GPS option."

"Oh, you careless stepmom..."

There were plenty of ways to locate someone besides GPS and, now that the car navigation industry was losing ground to smartphone map apps, they were using multiple methods to provide the precision that professional taxi drivers and truckers wanted. ...But there was no need to explain all that here.

"Maxwell, hijack all the nearby wireless routers and transmit on all frequency bands."

"No change to the drones' behavior. The jamming is not showing any effect."

"Damn. Do they switch to an autonomous mode if something goes wrong? Giving them everything from flight control to map software sure was generous."

Well, the devices were meant to deliver an online store's products. If poor signal would cut them off from GPS and allow them to get lost, the company would receive a storm of complaints about undelivered products. It was also possible people would maliciously mess with them like how people shined laser pointers at airplanes. If throwing a stone at the drone would make it drop its delivery, you could steal the products. In that case, it made sense for them to

include multiple map and control methods.

“By the way, do we need to share any information?”

“No,” replied Maxwell. “By entering a few devices inside that restaurant, I am aware that the world is in trouble at an idiot’s insistence. Rather than the central servers around the world, this is likely based on the misuse of the final backup facility that is generally hidden behind the scenes.”

“So when there’s a fatal error in the crucial network of 140 servers, authority shifts to the final backup. ...But is that infested with Adjust’s virus? No, would he really just leave malicious code in there like that?”

“He may not have needed to make such a risky move. After all, the final backup facility is normally cut off from the network and forgotten about.”

“A security conflict, huh?”

It was common for beginners to wonder what happened if you put multiple pieces of security software on the same computer. It was wrong to think that made it safer. The security software would fight each other and cause a fatal error.

“The 140 central servers use security type A and the final backup uses security type B. Checking each individual file won’t show anything malicious, but once they run into each other on the same network, a serious conflict occurs. If that’s how Adjust set this up...”

“Attacking people is not that complex an operation,” said Maxwell. “The delivery drones would already have the ability to recognize people and safely avoid them, so he would only need to flip that around so they recognize people, approach them, and pick them up as a ‘package’.”

A backup was no more than a backup, so you would only think about it in an emergency. If it was accessed for annual maintenance, no one would notice that “emergency exit hiding monsters”.

And once the door was unlocked and opened, the monsters would spill out into the world.

“Then did I pull the trigger? Because I sent a harmless virus into Wild@Hunt

via the central server to see how they would react!?”

“No. Based on Adjust’s statements, I would predict this was one of his plans for shaking Mrs. Amatsu Yurina. You merely stumbled across a remote-controlled bomb before the scheduled press of the button, so I doubt you influenced the amount of damage.”

“But...!!”

“Okay, okay. That’s enough of that.”

My stepmom casually cut in while driving the truck through the confused city buzzing with swarming drones.

“It looks like the drones indiscriminately swarm people to grab them, lift them up, and drop them from a height of 10 meters, or about three stories. And the people will fall earlier if they struggle on the way up, so the actual death rate shouldn’t be all that high.”

“I still can’t just ignore this. Nothing says they’ll stop after doing it to someone once. If they’re grabbed over and over after they’ve been weakened, they’ll be smashed beyond recognition.”

“True. And the real problem isn’t the drone swarms. The powerful stress will amplify malice and pave the way to a largescale moral hazard.”

Being hit by a bomb was not the only threat from a bombing. Even in a safe shelter, exposure to the intense noise and shaking for long periods of time could allow the powerful fear of death to eat at someone’s psyche and lead to severe PTSD.

You did not need a pure war machine that slaughtered everything.

Even with some openings left, a weapon could still damage the human mind.

“This could be a serious problem if it spreads to the global level,” said my stepmom. “All political systems are made so the minority manages the majority, but that means the rampaging majority can leave the minority of the military or police unable to function. In fact, the military and the police are sometimes the first to break.”

“Like the military coups you sometimes hear about?”

“Or police going on shooting sprees.”

We were discussing an age in which people destroyed other people, rejected their own civilization, and let go of happiness.

That was the Calamity, a largescale moral hazard that could wipe out the human race, and it was drawing ever closer.

“Besides, the problem isn’t over even if we do end the swarms of drones.”

“?”

Nevertheless.

Those drones were running on batteries, so optimistically, this would end on its own in a few hours. Pessimistically, they would be able to recharge themselves, but if the recharging stations were all destroyed, they would “starve” to death.

Destroying all of the stations would mean a fight around the world. But that at least gave us a goal. If we were prepared for a major power outage, it was the machines that would succumb first. There was still hope. Or so I thought.

“If a global corporation that props up the world is destroyed as the culprits here, it will lead to a global depression caused by economic damage the likes of which the world has never seen,” explained my stepmom. “The social stress will not go away either way. Solve this or not, it is extremely likely this will lead into the Calamity.”

“...Then there’s nothing we can do!”

That said, if Wild@Hunt escaped unscathed in order to preserve global stability and all the blame was forced onto a blatant scapegoat, it would only anger the world. No matter what was done, the extreme levels of stress would not go away. There really was no exit I could see.

“That’s right, Satori.”

Demon Lord Lilith had made such a mess of the world in ways seen and unseen, but she actually sounded timid here.

No.

“So, Satori, once I’ve collected everyone, I think we’ll finally head to Absolute Noah at the bottom of the dam.”

“Wha-?”

“That’s the entire point of the ark and the boarding tickets. If we can’t stop the Calamity, then we need to get onboard now regardless of what the schedule says.”

The truck was still driving through the chaotic city. And it was occasionally crashing through light cars people had abandoned in the road due to traffic. That meant she had a destination in mind.

But I had thought it was a destination we could use to fight back. I had thought we were working to stop these rampaging drones and solve this global problem.

“...Are you saying we’re going to run away? Just us?”

“We are going to survive. We will follow the original concept.”

“There might still be something we can do! We know so many people in this city!! Protecting ourselves from a disaster that’s already happened is one thing, but are you saying we’re going to run away before the end has arrived and just let it happen, mom!?”

“Famine brought on by overpopulation, extreme natural disasters caused by global warming, underground resources drying up, the world fracturing from the rise of isolationists... We had come up with several scenarios that could push global social stress past the limit and cause the Calamity. Monster corporations growing like a cancer on society was one of those scenarios. We knew this blood vessel in the brain was going to rupture eventually, but today is the day it reached the limit. You said it hasn’t happened yet, but the world’s prognosis of death was given as far back as the Cold War. Although it was given to us Archenemies millennia ago in the form of prophecies.”

“...How can I accept this?”

“Erika, who can’t even walk out in the sunlight, said the same thing. So did your father. They put up a fight, but now they’re inside the back of the truck. I have you now, so that just leaves collecting Ayumi from her secure private

school. Then I'll have won."

My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, may have seen in that way. For someone who had spent a long time preparing, this may have looked like the greatest climax. She would look across the peace-dulled masses and say, "See? I was right."

"How can I accept this!? Anastasia is visiting right now. And then there's Itou Helen, Kuroyama Hinoki, and of course the Class Rep!!"

"Then what do you propose?"

"This global drone rampage was caused by abusing a security conflict when Wild@Hunt decided their central servers were infected and switched over to the final backup facility. So if we go the other way..."

"No," said Maxwell. "Searching through all group data within the 140 central servers turned up no data on the final backup facility. We do not know where in the world it is. In fact, it might be on a satellite or space station, so locating it now is not realistic."

"Adjust Rex!"

"What?"

"Would that Wild@Hunt non-executive director really visit this regional Far Eastern city just to attack me? He also seemed pretty disillusioned with Wild@Hunt. We need to assume he had some other reason for being here. And if their normal network acts like the final backup facility doesn't exist, we can guess that he physically visited the facility to set up his security conflict."

Meaning...

"Wild@Hunt's final backup is hidden in Kukyou City."

"..."

"There is supposed to be a central server in each of Wild@Hunt's support areas, but for some reason Japan alone was borrowing another country's excess space. That wasn't just a rumor; Maxwell tracked it down to New Delhi!"

Then why wasn't Japan's central server working?

"The Japanese server was cut off from the network to act as the final backup."

“Even if so, what proof do you have that it is conveniently in Kukyou City?” asked Maxwell. “This is a relatively uninteresting regional city.”

“This city specializes in disaster research, so it’s the perfect place to put your insurance. It’s far safer and more trustworthy than a satellite which can lose control due to debris or solar winds. The final backup...no, the Japanese central server would be placed in this city. Right!?”

“Even if we do stop Wild@Hunt’s drones, we would not prevent the economic damage and the following global depression,” reminded my stepmom. “The Calamity will occur either way.”

It was true I did not have an answer for that yet.

If I made a poorly-thought-out move, I could become the direct cause of harm instead of just passively watching others die.

But.

Even so.

“...I won’t abandon them.”

“Satori.”

“It’s the same as with the Bright Cross’s Colosseum. Stopping that entertainment show hosted by the blue bunny girl wasn’t guaranteed to save the Archenemies. They might have changed the format and reopened as a different sort of murder show. But I did it anyway! And it was those results that got them through to today, right!? If I had given up then, Itou Helen, Muramatsu Yukie, Erika, Ayumi, and everyone else would have been killed after forced to fight to the death inside that giant bug cage! It would have been 100% guaranteed!! So I had to do it!! I had to reach for a miracle built up by our individual efforts!!”

“...That is definitely a moving story,” said Amatsu Yurina.

But...

“If we were talking about a stranger, I might have irresponsibly applauded. But, Satori, I decided to become your mother. No matter what deadly sins I must bear as a result.”

“...!?”

I was through with hesitating.

I unlocked the door and threw open the passenger-side door even though the truck was still moving. I opened it too hard and it immediately hit a road sign and was torn away, but I had bigger things to worry about.

But not because I had jumped out onto the road in a surge of manly resolve.

No, it was because a bloody man crawled up toward the opened passenger seat.

Crawled up? So from below? I was too confused to make any sense of it, so the first to react was my stepmom. She reached for her hip and pulled out a monstrous single-shot magnum with a barrel as thick as a flare gun and provided the accurate answer.

“Adjust Rex!!”

He was a Mummy Archenemy.

Had that dried-out bastard clung to the bottom of the truck after being hit by its 20-ton weight!? He had done some bragging about a pharaoh or something, but setting aside how infectious he was, he seemed even tougher than a Zombie or Vampire!!

“This isn’t over yet... I need your ark. And that brat is the master key, isn’t he!?”

“...!!”

My stepmom seemed hesitant to fire that with me in between them.

Reality was cruel, so no matter how carefully you prepared, the slightest moment of inattention could mean losing everything.

So...

“Ah.”

I heard a strange voice.

It wasn’t mine.

A delivery drone's crane arm was digging into Adjust Rex's shoulder as he clung to the outside of the truck.

“Ahh, ahhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

It was like watching swarming seagulls.

Had he not set himself as a targeting exception, or had his injuries and burns created too much of a change from his registered facial recognition data?

Regardless, the idiot was enveloped by the end of the world he himself had released and he was carried high into the sky.

...Well, both hackers and snipers could only act like a god until their location and identities were revealed.

And I did not have time to just watch.

The drones' attention was on Adjust, so this was my chance. If my stepmom threatened me with that monstrous single-shot magnum, I wouldn't be able to move.

This was my only chance to jump out.

If I hesitated, the fear would hold me in place. I pulled the card-sized car navigation device from its stand and threw myself out through the opening left by the missing door.

“Satori!?”

My stepmom screamed my name, but I wasn't listening. Before I could even think about my positioning or bracing myself for impact, I hit the asphalt and rolled along it. It hurt so bad it felt like having firecrackers stuck under my skin! I could hardly believe I didn't smash every last bone in my body to dust.

[illegible]

I was close to biting off my tongue from my own screaming! Damn, was the rolling you saw in movies and dramas really the right thing to do!? I had never done much rolling before, so you could laugh if you want, but I couldn't tell the difference between professional and amateur rolling!!

“If you do not hurry away, the drones or Mrs. Amatsu Yurina will reach you,” advised Maxwell.

“I know...that!”

I dragged my aching body along to slip into a narrow alley.

First of all, the drone attacks were an abuse of the system that flew through the sky searching for an address and then delivered the package to the front door or yard. They could not reach you inside or in an extremely narrow space.

And Amatsu Yurina’s semi truck required a fairly wide road to drive down. She could break through walls to force her way through, but it would lack the power to keep going while widening an entire alley.

“Where am I? I think this is near my school.”

“You will arrive at Kukyou First High School in another 500 meters.”

“The car navigation system suits you.”

“Then shall I use a more feminine synthetic voice?”

...That meant Itou Helen the Witch and the Class Rep would come first.

“Maxwell. Contact Anastasia, Kuroyama Hinoki, Muramatsu Yukie, Himatsuri Asami, my biological mom Magatsu Taori, and everyone else I know. Tell them not to go outside until the drone attacks are over.”

“Spreading the theory of indoor safety to the general public would likely reduce the worldwide damage.”

“With this going on, the message boards and social media will be full of misinformation. If you don’t have a title like ‘survival expert’, no one’s going to believe you.”

The one exception was receiving word from someone you knew personally.

This was caused by machines, but it could be classified as a disaster on a global scale. It was a lot like a swarm of locusts. And humanity would show off its unpleasant side in more than just the real world.

In fact, it was often easier to lose all restraint when indulging in the temporary anonymity of the internet, so people tended to be more skeptical.

I heard an unsettling buzzing sound overhead as the drones flew across the limited area of sky visible between the two buildings.

“Let’s go, Maxwell. I need to get to school for now.”

“Sure.”

I advanced through the narrow alley.

They appeared to have been ordered to indiscriminately attack humans, but how did they tell us apart from everything else? Facial recognition, walking patterns, or just a general humanoid silhouette? Knowing that could tell me how to avoid them, but I didn’t have time to make any precise tests.

If the alley grew just a little wider and the delivery drones decided they would not hit the walls, they would rush in to kill me. I could not help but feel nervous.

...But did that mean I could secure my safety by narrowing the walls myself?

“Is something the matter?” asked Maxwell.

“There’s a lot of stuff in this alley. If I pass a plastic rope through the drain spouts on the building walls so it’s strung up overhead, I bet I could create a ‘roof’ to keep them out.”

I could never cover an entire multilane road, but it was worth an attempt with a somewhat wide alley.

I felt more and more impatient, but I was slowly making progress through the maze.

Taking a different route from normal was not the issue. Setting up the plastic rope trick as I went was not enough. Time seemed to stretch out infinitely. A scream was slowly rising in my throat like a bus along a zigzagging mountain road. When I saw a horror movie with the actress running away and screaming in the remote mountains where no one could possibly hear her, I had always wondered how the scriptwriter didn’t question that, but now I understood. It didn’t matter if it was meaningless. Screaming wasn’t about actually seeking help; it was more of a way to release stress when your internal pressure was about to reach the limit.

Even so, I managed to force out some words.

“...I finally made it.”

It was the school.

My usual high school.

It was covered in windows and the entranceway had glass doors. It was just about the worst building to hole up in, but the conceptual mismatch of the delivery drones had saved them. The drones could have gotten in if they had tried, but the swarm never tried to pass through the windows.

But if they were not aware of that rule, the school had to have become a collection of deadly stress. They would all be heating each other like the coal in a steam engine, so who could say when their group psychology would take a negative turn and lead to violence.

Even now, I could hear a bold voice coming from the schoolyard speakers.

“This is Student Council Vice President Asasaya Kakugo standing in for the President. In the spirit of ‘ladies first’, the Student Council would like to guide all of the female students to the sturdy gym. The boys can wait until a further announcement.”

“Maxwell, start an electrical fire in the broadcast room. We can’t let the students be led by that perverted bastard and his blatant harem dream.”

“How about reducing that to an electrical shock? I will admit, however, that it could not be more obvious that he intends to lock up the gym with only himself and all the girls in the school inside.”

After a deafening roar similar to an audio feedback loop, all of the broadcast equipment went quiet.

...One danger of a disaster site was the possibility of an arrogant savior. Those pieces of shit would seek illegal rewards from the people they rescued. And unfortunately, it was a phenomenon found not just in amateur volunteers, but in professional rescue teams and soldiers as well.

Having a large group relying on you made you feel all powerful.

You felt the great dependence of people saying they needed you around.

Just like holding a gun made people feel bolder, a position of absolute

superiority over someone else had a way of revealing who someone really was on the inside.

This guy was already showing signs of that.

He was standing in for the President, but why had the President stepped down? Or what had they done during the confusion? That was something I was most interested in finding out.

That said, I had to find a way into the school.

Heading to the main entrance through the open schoolyard would be the height of folly. Heading to the faculty entrance from the parking lot out back would still be worrying.

“Maxwell, search for a way into the school. Physically, I mean.”

“Umm, this is a hard for me to say.”

“You don’t get to say there isn’t one and I have to give up. Itou Helen and the Class Rep are in there.”

“That is not what I meant. Do you perhaps remember the spider web of underground tunnels the Bright Cross built below Kukyou City for their abduction infrastructure? Well, the delivery drones appear to be avoiding indoor areas, so that would be super safe.”

“I’m such an idiot!!”

I held my head in my hands and screamed. All that lost time and excess tension was converted into exhaustion.

A normal person could not force open those electronic locks, but we could do it with ease.

“...Maxwell, give me a hurdle. Give me a reason why walking in the open all this time was actually useful.”

“Sure. In Kukyou First High School’s case, the door to the underground tunnels is in a storeroom across the schoolyard instead of directly in the school building. So if the students are to escape underground, they must find a way across that schoolyard from hell.”

“Okay!! That’s something for me to do!!”

I knew it was incredibly inappropriate, but the engineering type had a way of getting excited when faced with a difficult problem. ...The worst thing was to enter a death march where everything got worse and worse and there was nothing you could do.

“Maxwell, unlock all of the doors to the underground tunnels. And post about the escape route on various message boards. People might not believe it at first, but some will try it. And they’ll know it’s true once they see the doors open on their own.”

“Sure.”

“The drone attacks are happening on a global scale, but we need to start with building a foundation. If we can save Kukyou City, I want to do so. ...And that of course includes everyone in the school.”

It didn’t matter how sturdy it was.

I just had to create a path from the school building’s exit to the edge of the schoolyard that the drones would interpret as off limits.

I pictured something like a shopping district arcade.

The problem was the lack of anything to attach the plastic rope to in the wide open schoolyard.

I could not just charge out there, so I turned back into the narrow alley. I grabbed an abandoned bike leaning against the wall.

“You will be caught even if you ride that at full speed. Wild@Hunt’s drones can move at around 50km/h.”

“That’s not what I’m planning. If I remove the tire tubes and take apart the frame, I can create a giant slingshot. Let’s shoot down one of them.”

I did indeed use a small rock to shoot down a drone flying by overhead. Delivery drones of course were not built with weapons, so they could not strike back as long as I stayed in the safe zone.

I crouched down and grabbed the wreckage.

“Okay, let’s check the cameras and sensors to see how it perceives the outside world.”

“Sure.”

Car navigation systems apparently had cameras these days. They probably checked the redness of the driver’s face and the wavering of their eyes to prevent drunk driving.

I held it close so Maxwell could see.

“Its overall position is tracked with the double methods of GPS and wi-fi signal. The image processing is handled in all 360 degrees below it using the cameras on the bars extending down from the wing on the front and the wing on the back. It also has a microwave radar to cover everything in a sphere around it.”

Just because the two cameras were movable did not mean it could view everything around it at all times. Just like a turning fan, it had blind spots. And if the cameras failed to recognize a clear window or polished mirror, it would crash right into them. The radar would be used to avoid that kind of trouble.

That said...

“Just disturbing the radar signal wouldn’t be enough. Jamming them with wireless radars already failed.”

“Sure.”

“Then it’s just like a self-driving car. Let’s settle this with that thing that made those lab coats go pale on the test circuit.”

What materials did I have to work with? Yes, I did not need to do any metalworking with a lathe like a professional. I was concerned about erosion, but a large eraser would work for a short time. I used Maxwell’s calculations to carve down the surface and then it was time for the star to shine.

“Maxwell, search for the closest faucet on the school grounds.”

“Sure. Instead of the outdoor drinking fountain, there is an embedded sprinkler faucet in the flower garden next to the faculty parking lot. I have already confirmed the length and width of the hose attached. It is 20 meters

away, so that should take 4 or 5 seconds. Assuming no errors in your physical data, you should arrive before the drones gather around you.”

“...There’s a fence in the way. Did you include that in your calculations?”

“Of course. Please focus on the direct line to the sprinkler faucet. A hole has been cut away at the bottom of the fence, perhaps to allow a cat through.”

...Who had done that? A student or a janitor? Well, they had cut it pretty large so the cat wouldn’t get hurt, but if the wires caught on my clothes and I was trapped, that would be game over for my life.

I checked the drone-filled sky as I began doing some stretches near the alley exit. When I was this tense, I had to make sure I would not have any trouble with my Achilles tendon.

“Maxwell, track the drone distribution. Tell me when to start running.”

“That would be now.”

“That was fast!!”

I felt like an invisible hand had shoved me forward, so I ran out from the alley and toward the high school. The buzzing of what sounded like countless wings squeezed at my heart.

Taking the shortest route meant ignoring the back gate. I ran straight toward the tall fence and slid headfirst toward the cat entrance. The fence with the hole must not have reflected their radar waves properly because several drones ran into it behind me, damaging their propellers.

“!”

But I could not relax yet.

I checked the connection of the faucet embedded in the dirt and the rubber hose wound up on a drum. Then I took the handmade attachment I had carved from an eraser and shoved it inside the end of the hose.

Countless drones were already rapidly descending toward me.

I turned the faucet to full blast, grabbed the rubber hose, and held it toward the sky.

Water burst out like a fountain and surrounded me with a clear and flowing parasol.

It was like a magical barrier.

The ferocious swarm of drones came to a complete stop at the edge of the water parasol. Those weapons should have been able to lift a small car if working together, but they were unable to pass a barrier as thin as a soap bubble.

“Looks like it worked.”

“Sure. The drones use their cameras and radar together to determine what paths are safe. If neither sees a problem, they keep going. If one or the other sees a problem, they find another way around. But if the two give conflicting readings, they view the situation as dangerous. In some cases, they will briefly come to a stop instead of finding a detour and wait for instructions from the control center that can provide manual control.”

What mattered here was that I had created a parasol of water with no gaps rather than a normal shower or sprinkler. That mean the drones’ cameras could not see anything there, but the radar was reflected off the water and detected an obstacle. Just like the thick window of a skyscraper.

...And of course, the delivery drones could not receive manual assistance thanks to Adjust’s security conflict. Because he could not have a single click from the control center end their rampage. So if they were waiting for instructions but no one else could take control, they would naturally end up forever hovering in place.

“There was a similar problem with self-driving cars that use both cameras and radar. When a truck in the oncoming lane hit a puddle and created ‘wings’ of water on either side, the car mistook it for a wall directly in front of it and slammed on its brakes. But since someone could jump out in front of the car at any time in a shopping district, the emergency brakes have to be quite sensitive. That must have created a pretty serious bottleneck.”

Anyway, I had created a portable sanctuary. The rubber hose wrapped around the drum was only so long, but being able to walk around in the open without worrying about the drones meant a lot.

I just had to repeat this process.

“Let’s get in the school building.”

“You will need a large number of erasers. The school store would be the best source.”

...I would have loved to get all the students’ help for that, but I couldn’t force them to pay just because it was an emergency.

After buying what I needed from the aproned young woman who was still running the shop (perhaps to protect the register), I pulled rubber hose drums out from the school storage and attached them to drinking fountain faucets in the hallway.

This time, I did not mess with the ends of the hoses.

I used drills and chisels in the shop classroom to open holes in the sides of the serpent-like hoses and stuck the eraser attachments in there. Then I threw them out the window. I used the sprinkler faucet hose to protect myself while attaching the hoses so they reached from the school building to the end of the schoolyard where the door leading underground was.

“I’d like to have two hoses on each side.”

“Walking through there will probably leave you soaking wet.”

Yeah, the multiple fountains would collide and send the water falling down. You couldn’t neatly avoid all the water like you could with my simple handheld version.

I never explained what I was doing, but when people hesitantly looked out from the classroom windows, they must have noticed that I was walking around the schoolyard safely.

When I returned to the school building and turned on the water fountain faucet, a few people poked their heads out into the hallway.

“Senpai, um, what are you doing?”

“Itou-san? I’m not sure I can give a very detailed explanation, but the simple explanation is that the drones don’t like walls of water or complex underground pathways. I want to get all the students into the Bright Cross’s tunnels, so can

you help me? Yes, I've opened all of the tunnel doors around the city, so you can tell your families and their workplaces to use those. A direct message should get through to them, and that should help spread the information."

"S-Senpai, what are you fighting against now!? Honestly!"

"I'm really not sure this time. If I said it was 'the end of the world', would you believe me, Itou-san?"

"...Are you making fun of me?"

"I see. If that's your response, then unfortunately, I don't think I'll have a chance to explain this to you."

I left the underclassmen zone to her. I wanted to see for myself that the Class Rep was safe. Even if there was no strategic or logical reason to do so.

I ran up the stairs to my usual classroom. I ignored the teacher that told me to stop on the way there.

I threw open the sliding door and shouted inside.

"Class Rep!"

"No uniform, outdoor shoes, extremely late, and acting like you've done nothing wrong? Satori-kun, sit on the floor right here!!"

She immediately gave me a serious slap that nearly took my head off. *O-oww*. But at least she was safe...

The forehead glasses Class Rep put her hands on her hips and stood in front of me.

"Now, what are you doing, Satori-kun?"

"...I-I made a safe exit, so could everyone maybe head there?"

It would have been too much to expect people to risk their lives by going outside based only on my word, but I had proven it was safe by wandering around the drone-filled schoolyard. Looking out the window showed some underclassmen nervously crossing the schoolyard to reach the open door to the tunnel. The weird thing about these situations was how no one wanted to be the first to go, but they also did not want to be the last to leave. Once people

started leaving, everyone else started to follow.

“What will you be doing, Satori-kun?”

“I’ve made sure you’re safe, but I have tons more I need to do. So if you’ll excuse me...”

“I had a feeling you would say that. But did you really think I would let you escape?”

“Nin nin!”

The Class Rep was too Class Rep-y, so I played the ninja and took off running through the rapidly-emptying school building. I ran around to escape the cries of “wait” and ultimately lost that pursuer from hell by hiding inside a locker in the girl’s locker room. Heh heh heh. A splendid bit of psychological warfare, don’t you think? She would never expect a boy to hide in the girl’s one. And I was impressed she was worried enough about me to scold me during an emergency like this. Her kindness could be useful, but this was not the time or the place for it.

“Okay, Maxwell, let’s get down to business. We need to do something about these global drone attacks.”

“You should wait until you leave the locker to put on that ultra serious face.”

“First, I need to contact Anastasia.”

I wanted to sort through my information.

First, the Calamity was a disaster caused by extreme moral hazards occurring to all of humanity at once. The time limit was a fluid thing, so it could be hastened by increasing social stress.

The drone attacks were a global-level incident caused by Adjust Rex, supernatural hacker and non-executive director of the international corporation Wild@Hunt.

He had intentionally shortened the Calamity’s time limit and then took me hostage so my stepmom Amatsu Yurina would have to guide him to the secretly-constructed Absolute Noah.

I did not know his true goal. Did he want the ark to save him, or did he simply

not want to be in the same category as the Wild@Hunt executives?

The drone attacks had been spread with the interference of security type A and security type B when something happened to the 140 central servers and they switched over to the final backup created from Japan's central server.

It seemed odd that Adjust had traveled to this regional city in the Far East just to attack me, so the odds were good he was also here to sabotage the Japanese server being kept offline.

Meaning.

The source of all this, the final backup facility that was causing the conflict, was probably here in the disaster prevention city of Kikyuu City.

"So can we solve this entire problem if we locate it and send out a stop signal to all the drones around the world?"

I did not explain it to Anastasia since she would already know, but it was not recommended to use a network to hack in from the outside. Adjust, the big boss, had gone all the way to Japan to physically access the hardware. If a high-level supernatural hacker like him couldn't do it, then it was asking too much to expect us to figure out a way in with so little time to work with.

The fastest route would be to follow Adjust's example and go to the facility.

I adjusted my grip on the card-sized car navigation system.

"The security conflict causes the drones to act independently after their file structure has been compromised, but I think the final backup facility – Japan's central server – will still have access to them."

"Okay, boss. You deserve praise for bringing this to me instead of running off on your own."

"By the way, Anastasia, where are you right now? Are you safe?"

"I'm below a car in a parking lot and moving from one car to another. I can't relax though because those things can lift a cute Japanese car when they work together."

"That does sound like a route someone as small as you could use, but are you kidding me!? Didn't I tell you it was safe indoors!?"

“Hackers are always searching for loopholes, Truth,” explained Anastasia who had left the safe zone of her own volition. “While classifying each of the city’s wireless routers by carrier and cutting them off one at a time, I discovered something interesting. If you cut off one company’s routers, the drones will immediately switch over to a different one, but they have to get a new IP address each time.”

“The drones themselves don’t manage their own IP?”

“The reissued IP address is random, but it looks like there’s some rules behind it. It might be the three body problem using the earth, the moon, and Halley’s Comet. That means every single drone in the world has to access the exact same server or they can’t switch over. Could anything be more of a pain?”

“That must be Wild@Hunt’s final backup facility, Japan’s central server. That’s the conflict base that turned the delivery drones into weapons!”

I had Anastasia send me the data and found it was surprisingly close by. It was less than a kilometer away. It was officially known as an experimental gas turbine power generation facility. It was an experimental ground for the emergency power supplies placed below hospitals and the like. That gave them an excuse to create the immense power supply they needed, allowing them to leave no records of the ridiculous power consumption of the giant computer and cooling system.

...I didn’t know if it was meant to prevent terrorism or data theft, but all the official paperwork really did list the false identity.

From outside, it looked like a box made of concrete. It was an unremarkable sight in Kukyou City where disaster research was so prevalent.

“Good, good, good.”

“But how will you travel the 1000 meters?” asked Maxwell. “The drones are still a threat outside and the sprinkler hose does not have unlimited length.”

“ ... ”

“Would it be best to enter the tunnels and move as close as possible before returning to the surface?”

“No, if the city’s people have all taken shelter in there, even the Bright Cross’s giant facility will be jam-packed. Just looking at residents, we’re talking about 800,000 people. It would take a long time to shove my way through there.”

“Sure.”

I could not forget that it was only the people of Kukyou City that had a safe shelter. The drone attacks were occurring around the world, so I would find a horrific scene just one train station down.

Every minute and every second counted.

“...And the angry Class Rep is down there. If she catches me, it’s all over. She might grab both my legs and torment my balls with her lovely foot. Ahhh, she did agree to seal that away long ago, but you never know...”

“My only advice is to apologize sooner rather than later.”

With that in mind...

I looked up at the ceiling.

“A birdlime strategy might work...”

That conclusion was based on a few assumptions, so I had to actually prove those first. To do that, I needed a copier, so that meant the faculty room or the student council room.

“Maxwell, search for any antennas at GMT+9 aimed at 120 degrees with a vertical range of around 36,000 kilometers.”

“All of the satellite TV dishes attached to the roofs and balconies around there fit those conditions.”

“Search for a station with an IoT vulnerability we can use. Oh, I know. How many of them can run we-zap or HEARTcrash? Those were only ‘discovered’ this month, so there have to be some that are still vulnerable.”

I held that discussion while walking down the hallway to the faculty room. They must have left in a hurry because the door wasn’t locked and the computers were still on.

...Now, then.

“User, what are you doing?”

“Copying myself.”

I opened the scanner lid on the top of the same sort of industrial laser printer seen in convenience stores. Then I pressed my face against the glass reader surface and pressed the print button. And wow was it bright even with my eyes closed!

It spit out an A4 piece of copy paper with my flattened face on it. I grabbed that, approached the window, and pressed it against the thin glass.

I immediately heard that buzzing which sounded like tons of flapping wings. They did not break through the window, but several drones did react.

“Oh, so it’s just facial recognition? Then a stocking or a full-face helmet might’ve been enough.”

“No. If they are using multiple methods, they might use walking patterns or voice recognition when facial recognition fails. Predicting their routine before the software has been analyzed would be dangerous.”

“I know, I know. All I needed to prove was that I can get them to gather on a single spot.”

Just to be safe, I decided to make 10...no, 20 giant printouts of my face. Once that was done, I would search for the next material.

“The toughest material I can use would probably be a blue tarp. You can use those for anything. But that won’t cover all the gaps, so trash bags and duct tape would make a good finishing touch.”

“User, a quiz format is an inefficient form of communication.”

“I wasn’t trying to use that format. By the way, Maxwell, how’s the vulnerability search going?”

“I have found 502 matches.”

“...I know I set the parameters, but isn’t that an awful lot?”

“A lot of them were probably forgotten by the owners after they were released. Some of them have not updated their security in more than a

decade.”

I pulled a blue tarp and some trash bags out of the storage space below the stairs.

I didn’t have to worry too much about the size. It just had to be decently big.

“Maxwell, this school uses the city gas, right? Not propane?”

“ ...”

“Hey, don’t sulk and reply with dots.”

“...I have not been equipped with such an advanced and meaningless function.”

“You’re still using dots. Anyway, what kind of gas does the home ec room use?”

“If you mean what is installed in the cooking tables, they use the city gas. But they also seem to have portable cylinders of propane.”

“That’s not a problem then. Maxwell, how does city gas and propane differ?”

“One is liquid natural gas and the other is propane gas. Simply put, they have different base ingredients.”

“Exactly.” I smiled. “And that means city gas is lighter than air and propane is heavier than air.”

...I could do the actual work in the home ec room.

I carried the materials down the hall.

The home ec room was locked, but that didn’t matter. I kicked the sliding door down and forced my way in.

There was the gas, so everything would work out.

“Then let’s create an ad balloon. Maxwell, display the pattern for making a sphere.”

“I can do that, but an ad balloon?”

“That’s right. If I fill it with the lighter-than-air city gas and paste my face on the outside, the drones will go after it. Even if it’s way up in the sky.”

I used scissors and tape on the tarp and trash bags and managed to get it into the proper shape.

Climbing to the roof would've been a pain, so I decided to use the window to release it into the sky.

The drones gathered around the window, but they did not come in even with the glass fully opened.

I pushed out the natural gas ad balloon and then left it to its leisurely flight.

"Good, good. It's the perfect diversion."

Phase 1 was complete.

But I had to check on something before entering Phase 2.

I spoke into the card-sized car navigation system.

"Anastasia, are you still under a car?"

"Truth... To be honest, I'm fed up with your quiz format as well."

"I'm done with that. For the next 10 minutes, do not come out from below that car. If you do, you'll be exposed to a shower of glass."

Now.

The preparations were complete, so it was time for the main dish.

"Maxwell, locate the largest of the vulnerable satellites you found. Give me a list of the top three candidates."

"Sure. The top candidate is a Russian Netskiy copy satellite. It is a type of spy satellite built to resemble an American satellite and launched to intercept signals from surface facilities."

"...Russian, huh? It doesn't use nuclear power, does it?"

"Not as far as the blueprints say."

"Then use that satellite's photographs and thermography to check whether there are people moving around outside in Kukyou City. After confirming there's no one there, send it down. Yes, you take care of the trajectory calculations. Don't let it burn up in the atmosphere."

I made it sound so easy that Anastasia did a spit take on the screen.

“Bfff!? Wha-hold on, Truth!!”

“You know as well as I do that hijacking a satellite isn’t really all that hard. They suffer malfunctions and stop listening to ground control pretty easily, but you often hear about solar powered systems surviving for quite a long time out there. So many have been abandoned up there in the time since the Cold War that there’s plenty to choose from. And I’m not going to create a giant crater on the ground. Maxwell, give it a trajectory that will make it fall apart at 40km up. What I want is a shockwave.”

“...I see. I feel like we finally have the answer hinted at before the commercial break.”

That was why I had used the handmade ad balloon to lure the drones surrounding the school high into the sky.

There was an incident known as the Tunguska Event.

More than a century before, a mysterious explosion blew away an area of forest several dozen kilometers across in a remote part of Russia. There were initially a lot of rumors about it being a UFO crash or something, but it was actually caused by the shockwave sent in every direction by a meteor breaking apart just before hitting the ground.

I was going to do the same thing on purpose.

And the shockwave it caused would naturally have more of an effect on airborne objects than ones on the ground.

So that’s what I did.

The gigantic hammer from heaven smashed up the hundreds of drones I had lured into the sky above Kukyou City.

All the glass in the city must have shattered and rained down from the high-rise buildings as transparent blades. But everyone in the city had already escaped to the Bright Cross’s old underground tunnels, so it wouldn’t cause any real damage.

“Anastasia, are you okay?”

“Truth, after pulling off something like this, you can’t ever claim you aren’t a hacker.”

“I’m just a hobbyist who doesn’t really know what he’s doing.”

That should have taken out all the drones around the school. I had to leave now and make my way less than a kilometer to the Japanese central server which was being used as Wild@Hunt’s final backup facility and was disguised as an emergency gas turbine experimental power generation facility.

It might seem like I had gone overboard, but when looking at the total number of drones around the world, I had only destroyed an infinitesimal fraction. I had to run through the open area around the school before they redistributed to fill that gap.

My time was limited.

I hurried out of the home ec room, ran down the empty hallway, charged down the stairs, and left through the main entrance. At times like this, not knowing how to drive a car or motorcycle was a real pain. I couldn’t steal a car, so I had to run a marathon to the goal.

“Pant, pant. I-I’m gonna die...I’m really gonna die...”

“User, speaking while exercising will have the opposite effect.”

I knew that, but was Maxwell not flexible enough to pick up on the desire to complain!?

By the time I somehow made it to the concrete box, I heard that ominous buzzing again.

A drone!?

That was fast!!

“Maxwell, is security at the front gate!?”

“As you can see, there is no one there. The hired security guards would not have been told what they were protecting, so I imagine they felt no obligation to risk their life to fulfill their duty.”

Had it happened when the drones started attacking or when the tunnel doors

opened? I had no way of knowing when they abandoned their posts, but there was apparently no one there to keep me from crossing the pole that reminded me of a railroad crossing.

I didn't have time to wait around. If I didn't get indoors fast, I would be swarmed, grabbed, flown high in the sky, and dropped.

...If I was recorded by cameras, could I get away with it by saying I didn't want to die and was looking for shelter? Emergency shelter and self-defense were surprisingly broadly defined. The dividing line between that and excessive defense could get blurred when someone hurt someone else, but the hurdle would be a lot lower when it came to drones and a gate.

"I'm going in. Maxwell, support me."

"Sure. That is my purpose, so there is no need to mention it."

"No fair! I want to help create a legend too!!"

"Where even are you now, Anastasia? I don't want to include any unpredictable factors in my plan."

I climbed over the abandoned secret facility's front gate and ran across the grounds. The drones were clearly after me. If they caught me, I would be tormented to death. The fear and panic threatened to stop my legs, but I forced them to keep carrying me to the concrete box of a building.

"What kind of electronic lock is it!?"

"No. My search returns nothing. Perhaps because this is a Wild@Hunt secret facility. It could be an in-house design instead of a commercial maker."

"Oh, is that so!?"

No matter how complex the lock, the door itself was made of glass. It was probably strengthened with some impurities, but I easily broke through with a tackle from the shoulder.

The dividing line between outside and inside stopped the many drones.

"...I made it, dammit."

I was covered in glass shards as I groaned and got up.

It was unclear how many people would even visit this place each year, but it looked no different from the offices seen in dramas. It had a normal reception counter, sofas in the waiting area, and an elevator hall in the back. The wall had a few panels displaying projects related to the gas turbine power generators. ... They really went all out on the camouflage. Would there normally be a receptionist sitting at that desk?

There really was no one inside.

The guards and employees had probably taken shelter in the tunnels after I opened the doors. It was strange thinking that the people protecting Wild@Hunt's secret facility had relied on us.

"How much control do you have over the facility?"

"Unfortunately, almost none," replied Maxwell. "In case some employees remain, I recommend arming yourself with weapons and armor."

Now.

...I was here, but what was I going to do?

Even Adjust had needed to directly access the hardware to sabotage it, so I had figured finding a way in through the network would be nearly impossible, but Maxwell could not even open the front door. The communication, storage, and power equipment used for the final backup created from the Japanese central server would be even more strictly defended, so I doubted I could pull this off on the fly.

...My situation may have been like forcing my way into a bank late at night, but finding the vault was too hard to break into.

"What shall we do?" asked Maxwell.

"Revert to the basics. Maxwell, check the disaster prevention system for the Japanese area facility."

"I already told you I cannot even open the front door. I cannot access that information."

"I won't say anything, but you need to be less hard-headed, Maxwell. The disaster prevention manual isn't exclusively located in the strictly-guarded

facility itself.”

“ ...”

“Ohhh? Do you want me to give you the answer? I guess even you aren’t all-powerful. Maybe I was expecting too much from a simulator. Sorry about that.”

“No. Please wait! ...Thinking... I have found it. It was submitted to the local fire station. I am hacking in and extracting the requested data! I have not lost!!”

“Hey, Truth. Do I really have to listen to you flirting like this?”

At any rate, we had the disaster prevention manual submitted to the fire station.

Why would they give an outside group a manual that includes the building’s internal information? One reason to undergo that risk was to show that they had their own firefighting team and thus the fire fighters were not to enter the facility even if there were reports of a fire.

That was how it worked for museums, nuclear power plants, and germ labs that could not have someone starting a fire from the outside and sneaking in disguised as a fire fighter.

Of course, a document meant to convince the local fire station would not include all the information. It would be silly to put everything on the document meant to keep anyone from getting inside. Someone could then use that to plan an attack.

But the document would provide partial information on the flow of people and objects during an emergency.

And as you could tell from a school’s emergency exits, an emergency system meant increasing the number of back entrances.

“Now, what would happen in case of a fire?”

“It seems nitrogen gas is sent in to extinguish a fire when an oddity is detected. There is probably a reason it does not use the standard carbon gas.”

“That can’t be all. This is the final fortress of a global corporation. With the exception of this floor, I bet the entire building is a treasure trove of data lined with server systems larger than industrial fridges. How many billions would they

lose if just a single one of those got fried? And how far would the damage grow if the fire spread? Their system wouldn't have them sitting around twiddling their thumbs just because the fire wouldn't go out."

"Please give me your instructions. What exactly am I supposed to do, you bastard?"

"Ohhhh? Maxwe-..."

"No!! I will find it on my own, so be quiet!! ...The hypothetical schedule's numbers are incredibly optimistic. The time between the outbreak of a fire and the resolution is extremely short. And there seem to be an excessive number of emergency exits for the number of staff. Meaning..."

"You're taking too long, so I'll just cut to the chase: they probably have cart-like rails installed on each level's floor and along the stairs."

"Ah."

"If a fire breaks out, the 'fridges' are cut free and sent outside. Or if that won't make it in time, the 'fridges' that are still undamaged will be sent outside like canned goods on a factory conveyer belt."

"Ahh! Ahh!! Ahhhhh!?"

"Why are you so upset? It was just a riddle."

In this day and age, robot carts were used to carry materials and products in and out of factories and self-driving cars would be driving on the public roads before long. When each machine could be worth a billion yen, it was hardly surprising to find an unmanned evacuation system meant to protect them.

"Then the rest is simple. We use data to trick the system into thinking there's a fire it can't put out. If we can't get in, then we have them bring it out to us."

There were two general types of fire detectors: those that sensed heat and those that sensed carbon dioxide.

"Puppukupu..."

"Where did you download that emotional expression?"

"...User, I suggest you learn some basic table manners as a gentleman."

But these major computer facilities produced a lot of heat and used fridge-like cooling systems, so they did not work well with heat detection. The fire system probably detected carbon dioxide.

The electrical fire extinguishing system used nitrogen gas instead of carbon gas to ensure the carbon dioxide for fire detection was not mixed with the non-flammable fire extinguishing gas. ...Of course, we could take advantage of that.

“Okay, Maxwell, I’m going to climb up to the roof.”

“Pu.”

“That’s kinda cute, so I think I’ll leave it at that.”

“Warning: a mistaken decision here will turn me into a very troublesome girl.”

That unprecedented threat made me give up on the quiz format.

“Whether it’s an office air conditioner or a large computer cooling system, the basic principle is the same. There’s a giant external unit on the roof and that sends the cool air through the ducts, so if we mess with that unit, the gas we want will be quickly spread throughout the building. That’s one way of attacking with poison gas or germs.”

I explained while borrowing a handbag behind the counter that probably belonged to the receptionist. I checked inside and pulled out some hairspray, deodorant, a simple espresso set, and any other spray cans I could find. I checked the detailed ingredients on the side to tell between what I wanted and what I didn’t.

Yes.

Because CFC gas and liquid natural gas were dangerous, some spray cans had carbon gas inside.

“I just need to release the gas from these into the intake on the roof.”

“But it will be diluted across the entire building. Will it remain concentrated enough to trigger the fire alarm?”

“If that doesn’t work, I can try cooking fish on a grill up there. Well, I’m sure it’s made so a single cigarette’s smoke would set it off, so I doubt we’ll have to go that far.”

The final backup facility was a giant concrete box. Except for the reception lobby on the first floor, it was filled with computers as large as industrial fridges. Although I didn't know how many floors it was divided into.

...But as long as I didn't try to get inside the box, I could move around freely. For example, I could use the emergency stairs. That was a humanitarian measure, just like how a prison's cell doors would open when there was a fire. If they asked for authorization to use the emergency routes, they would only leave more employees trapped in the fire in an emergency.

The stairs zigzagged back and forth more than 10 times, so it was probably more than 5 stories.

When I reached the roof door, the tension came back.

"...I'll be back in the drones' territory from here on."

"The drones seem to be lifting their targets to a height of three stories and dropping them to the ground, but it is possible that will be added to the height of the building in this case."

"I'm aware of that."

So if I was unlucky, I could be killed instantly.

I had survived this far, so I was not reckless enough to charge out there without a plan. I wasn't just running across the roof. I had to remove the duct intake cover and mess with the spray cans, so I would have to stay in one spot for a while.

"...Here goes."

"Sure."

Luckily, the drones were reliant on electricity and this was an important facility that held a lot of intellectual property. As the nitrogen gas fire extinguishing system and device evacuation system indicated, its disaster prevention systems had been expanded quite a lot.

It could not be used on an electrical fire, but that was not the only source of a fire. It was not surprising for one of these to be installed.

"Ready, set, go!"

I kicked open the metal door. The swarm of drones naturally responded to my presence, but I aimed the object I held at them.

It was a perfectly normal fire hose.

As soon as I turned the ring-shaped valve surrounding the metal nozzle, a nearly explosive boom pounded my eardrums even though it was only using water. I desperately held onto the thick hose as it writhed like a living creature and I hit the airborne drones with the high-pressure water like it was a flamethrower.

These were only “toys” that could be brought down with a small rock and their delivery routines prevented them from coming inside even if the door was open.

The attack was one way.

Even if dozens or hundreds of them were gathered outside, I could just keep attacking from safety.

The drones were only a weaponized version of an existing device, so they weren't too great a threat if you observed them calmly and dealt with them appropriately. Unlike a Zombie or Vampire, the infected area and absolute number did not explosively grow, so this wasn't so bad.

“They're really piling up.”

“There are indeed a lot of them.”

I just needed a path, but they were like a swarm of moths killing themselves on a bug zapper. A small mountain had formed on the wet rooftop.

Then something changed.

I heard an unpleasant sound and smelled a burnt stench.

“Wah!?”

“Warning: an electrical fire has developed. The delivery drones should have been waterproofed against rain, but if the impact of the high-pressure water damaged their plastic bodies, the waterproofing would be lost. Also, the drones carry quite a lot of power to keep flying for extended periods of time, so a short creates the risk of fire.”

The unpleasant smell of burning plastic reached my nose. There were so many drone corpses(?) that there was nowhere left to stand and they had started to burn.

“...But I guess this saved me some time?”

An actual fire would give me what I wanted, so now I didn't have to spray the carbon gas into the duct intake. If this was really the final backup for a global corporation, it would be made from high-quality fireproof concrete, so scorching the surface would not burn the whole facility down.

“Will it really work that well, Truth?”

“Normally, an employee would probably stop the alarm manually, but there's no one here now. And they wouldn't have known these were the seeds they had sown.”

A heavy metallic noise came from below. The fridge-sized computers were probably being evacuated using the cart-like rails.

“Now to end this. They're probably still connected even now. If they have short-range wireless and robot cart batteries, they'll still be hooked up to the internet for a short time.”

Instead of performing any kind of calculations, that would really just give them time to safely power down.

I ducked back inside and descended the emergency stairs. Then I used another fire hose to fight with the drones before entering the courtyard.

“Maxwell, this won't buy much time.”

“Sure. If they are sending out all sorts of short-range wireless signals outside with no electromagnetic shielding, then it will not be a problem. If you get close enough to the parallel machines, I can catch the signal and get to work.”

“Good.”

“Ah, ah, ahh!?” shouted Anastasia. “You're creating another legend!?”

“What? Do you want me to use one of your viruses for the finishing blow?”

“I am sick of being taken on a guided tour. Hmph, hmph!”

...Was this atmosphere the latest trend or something?

“Maxwell, you can ignore the drones’ security conflict. Just stop them from moving. You can create a new virus if you need to.”

“Sure.”

“Ugeh!?” said Anastasia. “You can just say ‘create a virus’ to have some brand new malware made!?”

“Don’t you underestimate my daughter.”

“...I am always shocked to learn my gender has already been determined like that.”

At any rate, this would end it.

The fire hose’s high-pressure water was not invincible. My arms could only keep up the resistance for a few more minutes. But with that much time, we could fill the exposed server system with as much graffiti as we liked.

“I have used the Japanese area’s final backup server to acquire the attitude control program from the drone specification document. I have rewritten the code to automatically create malware that causes problems with the autonomous flight, leading to a literal crash. I have uploaded it to the backup server and the infection of every active drone is beginning.”

The effect was dramatic.

Plastic and rare earths rained from that twisted sky. It was like the bizarre phenomenon in which small fish and frogs fell from the sky.

“The effect has been confirmed. The malware has successfully spread across the entire world. We can assume this has effectively put a stop to the drone attacks.”

“...So we can rest easy for the moment.”

“Ahn? Truth, why only ‘for the moment’?”

“To be clear, this is only a prediction made by my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina.”

“...That’s a name I want to hear even less than Nostradamus right now.”

“Once the drone attacks end, it will be time to assign blame. If Wild@Hunt

accepts the blame, the massive damages will make bankruptcy unavoidable. That will break a pillar of the world and cause an age of depression. But if Wild@Hunt manages to weasel out of taking responsibility, the unfairness of it all will cause the people around the world to boil over and lead to a storm of rioting.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Are you saying what I think you’re saying!?”

“...No matter what happens, this will apply pressure to the entire human race and introduce all sorts of social stress. It’s like throwing a lit match onto the powder keg of the Calamity.”

[Support by] The Collapse of a Giant [DELTA brain]

When a giant organization falls, the damage will spread to seemingly unrelated places.

Take the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation for example.

The fall of evil leading to an age of peace only applies to the demon king's castle in a children's book. The chaos from the collapse of one enemy will create new hatred and new conflict with the next enemy.

World War One created World War Two which in turn led to the Vietnam War.

But instead of deciding not to fight at all, it is crucial to imagine that chain of hatred, secure a breakwater, and propose the direction you believe things should head.

Chapter 6

The truth was, I had made a similar mistake once in the past.

Yes, when I had destroyed the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation that had its roots planted in more than 100 countries around the world.

I had revealed the international organization's misdeeds and destroyed it in order to rescue the Archenemies being abducted by them and forced to kill each other in front of the TV cameras.

As a result, all of the Bright Cross's charitable activities around the world had been stopped indefinitely, the development of new drugs had been delayed, and developing nations' economies had stagnated which led to a decline in public safety...

I still don't think I made a mistake with that decision. I'm truly glad those Archenemies didn't lose their lives.

But.

There was no way of finding an accurate number for how many people's lives had been sent off course by that chaos.

"Just because it's happened before...doesn't mean it will work out this time."

I said that while leaving Wild@Hunt's Japanese central server facility which acted as their final backup.

At the moment, I wanted to go to a park or something. I had been attacked in that burger shop before, but I wanted to look up at the recovered blue sky while discussing strategy.

...I wanted someone to prove to me that I had done the right thing.

"The world still hasn't recovered from last time, so it might not survive this time. I think my stepmom's prediction is correct. ...I once again did the right

thing and thus chose another tragedy.”

“...Truth.”

“But unlike before, I’ve predicted it in advance. So I’m not going to just let it happen this time. I’ve set our course, so now I have to stop the disaster up ahead!”

My general policy had not changed from the beginning.

I had needed to stop Wild@Hunt’s manufactured abuse. I couldn’t have ignored the drone attacks.

People must have still been afraid of the drones because the children’s park I came across was deserted. I sat on a bench with peeling paint and focused on the conversation.

“The loss of a global corporation like Wild@Hunt will do incalculable damage,” said Maxwell. “In addition to the effects of the company itself, it also provided a lot of data and distribution services, so its loss will have a large effect on other companies and groups.”

...For example, they had recently gotten involved in railroad infrastructure.

“The parts not limited to the company sound the most dangerous,” said Anastasia.

“They also have contracts with some international NPOs and nations. They construct transport infrastructure in mountainous regions or lay out water pipes in desert nations.”

“Basically, they were trying to give everyone access to necessary supplies,” I said. “If that suddenly goes away, those people could literally wither away.”

“This also affects you, user. It goes through separate independent administrative institutions, but the Japanese government has entrusted a few national projects with Wild@Hunt.”

I rubbed the weathered bench’s peeling paint. Wood, metal, a concrete base, organic paint. What percentage of this was made domestically? I wouldn’t be surprised to learn it was entirely foreign-made.

...Just one look at the food self-sufficiency rate would show you it’s a wonder

this country could maintain its own existence. We relied on bringing so much in from “outside”.

Our small land area meant we had little productivity, but distribution was an unavoidable problem for an island nation surrounded by oceans on all sides. What had once been known as black ships and steamships had been replaced by cargo fleets loaded with wax oranges soaked with agrochemicals and the orders were made over the internet.

“How do we stop the dominos from falling?”

“That would be extremely difficult, but if you are not interested in saving Wild@Hunt itself...”

I leaned back in the creaking bench as the simulator explained via speech bubble.

“The domino effect will be caused by word of Wild@Hunt’s demise causing other corporations to grow defensive, rethink even their safe-looking contracts, and grow reluctant to give out loans. To put it another way, if something – even a complete lie – can convince them to act more boldly, stopping the dominos would be possible.”

“...But that would have to be quite the powerful lie.” Anastasia sounded troubled. “It’s true there are times when stock prices rapidly change for silly reasons. A clerk mishears and forgets the decimal point for a purchase or sale, or an automatic trading program is infected by a virus and starts a hellish selloff. Prices can also plummet if word spreads that the world will be destroyed in a war or disaster just as some prophecy claimed.”

“Yes. But there’s a difference between it just happening and someone intentionally causing it.”

I looked up into the blue sky and saw the narrow contrail of a passenger plane that looked like a tiny speck.

“If you could do that, it would be one of the world’s greatest achievements,” said Anastasia. “That was what we were trying to do with Mephistopheles, our supercomputer that extracted all the data from Vegas.”

That would mean controlling the very concept of money which had ruled

people for all of recorded history.

This would be truly unprecedented.

But a miracle like that was necessary if we were to stop the Calamity. My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, had so much power, but even she had given up on the world.

Yes.

“My stepmom’s Absolute Noah probably has more influence than anyone, but not even that’s enough. We need to discuss this with the assumption that not even she could stop this.”

“...They’re a secret organization that makes the freemasons look like child’s play, right?” said Anastasia. “I’ve never heard of an organization that covers more of the planet than them.”

“ ...”

I looked up at the blue sky’s recovered safety as I thought for a bit.

Was this too farfetched? But didn’t we need that powerful a wake-up call right now?

“User. The greatest power of human beings is their ability to link pieces of information together in ways that not even I can. In other words, your ability to come up with new ideas. I suggest you provide even the most insignificant idea you might have.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

“We won’t laugh, so just tell us, Truth. Besides, I hate how you’re the one that always gets to do all the fun stuff.”

I had some excellent companions.

I was certain of that.

“If we had the influence of my stepmom’s Absolute Noah, we might be able to deceive everyone. We might be able to convince them there would be no global depression so they should rest easy and keep running their business like normal. But my stepmom’s group has already resigned themselves to the

Calamity, so they won't help us."

This was entirely reliant on someone else's power, but we couldn't ignore Absolute Noah if we were looking for something on a global scale which was within reach.

"Are you saying we would have a chance if Mrs. Amatsu Yurina were to act?" asked Maxwell.

"But how would you do that!?" asked Anastasia. "You remember what happened in Vegas. I can't imagine her changing her mind and siding with us!"

"...That's the thing."

What I was saying was completely absurd.

But Absolute Noah itself was practically a fairy tale already. We could not bring it to the negotiating table in any normal fashion. So if we didn't do something completely unprecedented, we couldn't gather the cards we needed.

I glanced down at the small car navigation system sitting on my lap.

"Listen, Anastasia. In the hidden parts of the world that we don't see, there have to be constant glimpses of the term Absolute Noah. But that's just the term itself, so only a limited group knows what it actually means."

"Well, yeah. Otherwise the global VIPs wouldn't have fallen for the Absolute Noah 04 trap in Vegas."

Everyone feared it, but no one knew what it was. They didn't know its ideology, its form, its command structure, the extent of its personnel, or anything else about it.

It may have been disturbing to a lot of people.

But in that case...

"So."

I licked my lips.

And I said it.

"How about we invent a previously-unheard-of top-level organization for

Absolute Noah?”

Silence followed.

The silence was bad for my stomach and had me worrying I had said something crazy.

“Ha...ha ha.”

“Anastasia?”

“Ah ha ha ha!! So you’re going to manipulate the global economy with fake news!? Truth, you’re always like this. When everyone else is trying to win the car race by looking at the engine and tires while desperately calculating out the fuel efficiency, air resistance, and center of gravity, you’re casually building yourself a rocket capable of escaping the solar system!!”

She seemed to like it.

As for Maxwell...

“I am merely a disaster environment simulator meant to help avoid risk, so please forgive me for only providing negative suggestions.”

“That’s fine. So what is it?”

“Generally, stealing someone’s identity produces negative emotions. This introduces the risk of making an enemy of Absolute Noah. An extremely high risk.”

“...”

This silence was different from before. It felt like it was encased in dry ice.

Making an enemy of that stepmom.

And of Absolute Noah as a whole.

“User, we can no longer ignore the fact that one of the main reasons you have survived to this day is your connection to Mrs. Amatsu Yurina.”

“Maxwell!” protested Anastasia.

“No, it’s fine,” I said.

“And if you make a serious enemy of Absolute Noah, the risk to you will be far

greater than ever before. ...You might save the world, but your own life will not be guaranteed. Are you prepared to make that choice?”

I will never give up and I will keep fighting to the end no matter who my enemy is.

It would be simple enough to give that boilerplate answer. But I had seen the series of events set in motion by the Bright Cross’s Colosseum below this city. That powerful current had swept away one of the world’s systems. So what if that happened to me alone? There was no way I could win. I would simply be torn apart.

My stepmom was trying to protect me. There was no doubting that. But if she learned that would mean the destruction of the ark and placing the rest of her family in danger, even Amatsu Yurina would take it more seriously. She might abandon her primary objective, shift down to her secondary objective, and focus on protecting “as much of her family as possible”.

“...Maxwell. Anastasia too. I want to confirm something with you first.”

“Sure.”

“What do you still need to check now?”

I breathed in and out.

And I said it.

“Do you have any intention of getting along with Absolute Noah? No, it doesn’t even have to be that much. Would you be willing to find a way to compromise with them?”

That would be the same as “working with” the Bright Cross’s Colosseum or Las Vegas’s Absolute Noah 04. ...At the very least, you wouldn’t be chosen for the unfortunate role.

This was not about ideals.

It was not about being irreproachable.

I was talking about harsh reality.

“...Hey, wouldn’t that actually be even more frightening?”

It was like relying on a mafia or gang. It might feel reassuring at first, but the fear would eventually sink in and keep you from doing anything. If we took something like the Colosseum or Absolute Noah 04 as a partner, we would lose an escape route for our lives.

“I’m not talking about which option would be easier. We’re going to experience hell either way. So shouldn’t we be focusing on which hell we want to jump into?”

And.

“If we’re going to stand up to hell, we need to go all out. We need to completely and utterly crush it without showing the slightest opening. Because if we give Absolute Noah the chance for even a single counterattack, we’ll be smashed to pieces.”

We couldn’t hesitate here.

We had to do it.

We had to do whatever it took to shake off the force pulling us toward hell and retrieve our everyday lives.

“We’ll hack Absolute Noah, the ark of humanity. What better idea is there?”

That was my answer.

I doubted I could come up with anything better even if I used every last ounce of intelligence I had.

And Anastasia gave her response.

“...It’s perfect.”

“Anastasia?”

“Mountain climbers will see a famous mountain and say they want to climb it because it’s there, but you’re different, Truth. You start by searching out some huge mountain no one has ever seen before. Yes, yes, that’s it! If Absolute Noah is at the source of all this, then why didn’t I think of hacking it!?”

“No,” said Maxwell. “The Bright Cross was a lower organization, but its Laplace was impossible to break through in a head-on competition. Absolute

Noah's data management system should be even more powerful. I doubt this will be a simple task."

I knew that.

For one thing, the world was generally aware of the term Absolute Noah, but no one knew any details about what it was. It wasn't normal for none of the press, intelligence agencies, or bored internet users to notice such largescale activity. And abnormal things did not just happen. Absolute Noah had to have created some kind of hideous system and secretly spread it around the world to protect itself.

But.

"It's not like we don't have any hints."

"What do you mean?"

I leaned forward in the bench as I answered.

"Absolute Noah is in this city. At the bottom of Kukyou Dam. Las Vegas's Absolute Noah 04 was only modeled after it."

Yes, my stepmom had clearly said so:

...So, Satori, once I've collected everyone, I think we'll finally head to Absolute Noah at the bottom of the dam.

I had responded to those words by jumping out of the moving truck and eventually found my way here.

My stepmom would soon be an enemy, so relying on her words may have been suicide, but she had been desperate enough to crash a truck through that burger shop to rescue me. I doubted she would have been playing games with her words then.

"That is not enough to help us."

"Maxwell, it's in this city," I repeated. "Listen. Absolute Noah is an impenetrable wall and I doubt even you can break through its firewall or communication encryption so easily. Do we agree on that point?"

"...Reluctantly."

“But encryptions you can’t break aren’t exactly common. The Pentagon, MI6, and other groups you see in movies are one thing, but I doubt there are many high-level encrypted signals flying around in this regional city. Even with freaks gathered from around the world for a white hacker festival.”

“Yeah, even universities have pretty poor security,” said Anastasia.

“Wild@Hunt is in disarray, so they won’t be doing much of anything. So the unbreakable encryptions traveling through this city give us a hint. We don’t have to know what they say. Simply discovering where they’re transmitted and received should tell us where Absolute Noah people are hiding and where their surface antenna is.”

And to reiterate, our greatest objective was to borrow Absolute Noah’s authority and stop people from pulling the trigger of a global depression leading to the Calamity. We were not trying to divulge Absolute Noah’s misdeeds or blow their ark to smithereens.

I spoke more to myself than to the others.

“What we need is the credibility to convince people our words are Absolute Noah’s words. So we don’t have to enter the deepest depths of Absolute Noah’s central computer. If we locate their surface antenna and send out emails with ‘Absolute-Noah-like’ messages, no one will be able to tell the difference. The real Absolute Noah is working to fight back against the Calamity and we should gather their attention once we start. But since they assume the outside world will be destroyed, they can wait until that has entirely failed before they kill us. No, they can simply shut us out of the ark.”

“Even if the technical challenge is reduced, the risk to your person remains unchanged.”

“I know that. But I have to do it.”

Whatever the case, we had no time.

If we did nothing, the blame for Wild@Hunt’s drone attack would inevitably lead to a global depression. That would increase social stress, create devastating moral hazards, and ultimately lead to the Calamity.

We had to stop that no matter what.

I stood up from the bench and spoke.

“Let’s get started.”

“Sure. If you are prepared for this, user, then nothing I say could stop you.”

...Now.

I wasn’t so sure I had such a courageous heart.

The drone attacks had ended, so I walked on foot to regroup with Anastasia. We met at the lounge of the business hotel she was staying at.

“The café employees have completely vanished. Well, they only served bad coffee and dried-out sandwiches, so it’s no real loss.”

“...I see you brought in an energy drink for yourself.”

“There’s no one in the convenience stores or supermarkets, but the vending machines still work. That said, the scene outside is incredible. There’s barely room to walk with all the drone carcasses. Those are probably a potential treasure trove of rare earths.”

“Add in the effort of digging them out of the circuit boards and a 1300-yen-an-hour job at a gyudon place would be more efficient. But if you feel like doing it as volunteer work, I won’t stop you.”

I sat in the opposite seat and she tossed me a new can.

“We still have a lot of work ahead of us, don’t we? Truth, how about you fill your veins with carbonation and caffeine?”

“Don’t throw carbonated drinks. Here, cheers.”

“Gyah! Don’t reach for the pull tab with the opening aimed at me! It’s scary!!”

It turned out to be a dud, so it didn’t burst out like champagne. I grabbed the silver can Anastasia had passed me and quickly drank some.

“Have you contacted the Vampire and Zombie who Demon Lord Lilith claimed to have abducted?”

“No word from my sisters, no. And when I tried to call, someone attempted to

trace the call.”

“...So they’re already inside Absolute Noah, hm?” she said quietly.

I sighed.

“My stepmom and the others won’t be convinced just because the drone attacks have stopped. They believe this will lead to the Calamity, so they aren’t about to open Absolute Noah’s doors.”

“Well, in a way, that means the monsters have shut themselves inside the cage, so it’s safe outside. Let’s try to stay positive.”

“Right.”

...According to my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, the condition for entering was to have a powerful psyche that would not be swept along with the general public during a moral hazard like the Colosseum, but it still felt really dangerous to me.

I placed the card-sized car navigation system on the table.

Anastasia frowned.

“...Truth, why are you carrying a device that’s just as obsolete as a pager? What kind of cult have you joined?”

“My usual smartphone was sent to heaven by that Wild@Hunt VIP. I know this is a poor substitute.”

“Oh, you poor thing! If you had just told me, I would have given you my spare mobile device!”

“I have no intention of accepting a hacker’s handmade toy since the OS itself could be filled with who-knows-how-many viruses.”

“I’m pretty sure Maxwell-chan would root them all out in short order.”

“And would you be monitoring the virus extermination from start to finish as a benchmark test?”

We had gotten sidetracked.

It was time to get down to business.

“Maxwell, have you picked up any signals with encryption strong enough to

suspect they're related to Absolute Noah?"

"Sure. As long as you do not want to decrypt them. I have found an unknown signal connecting a few areas outside the city with a communication tower in the mountain reservation district."

"What does that mean?" asked Anastasia.

"That is where the dam is," I replied. "Everyone using a cellphone or disaster radio in the mountains will have their signal boosted by that communication tower."

"So they aren't even trying to hide themselves anymore. They must honestly believe there's no need for camouflage because the Calamity is going to destroy everything."

"Without Maxwell to test the strength of the encryption, we never would have known. The dam is constantly communicating with the water department to provide data on water level and quality and it also works with a weather station to adjust the amount of water released to avoid flooding the rivers. When you have that much data to hide your communications in, no one will notice anything."

"You're such a biased father."

"I'm only stating the facts."

"I am not used to such direct praise," said Maxwell. "I am unsure how to respond."

That meant our current destination was that communication tower in the mountains. If we could mess with that to disguise our messages as coming from a mysterious agency at the top level of Absolute Noah, we might be able to stop the global depression and the extreme moral hazards of the Calamity that would follow Wild@Hunt's collapse.

It could only be a sedative or some fake news for now. We just had to send out a powerful message that kept the world's people from despairing and giving up on everything.

We drank the rest of our energy drinks.

“We’ll be doing some hardware cracking this time. Anastasia, we’re going to be busy.”

“Heh heh heh. Messing with the communications infrastructure to hijack the signal? This is getting exciting.”

We left the business hotel together.

There was almost nowhere to walk with all the crashed drones everywhere, so we couldn’t even use a bike. We walked through the empty streets to reach the mountains.

“Just looking at the weather, this is the perfect time for a walk. Heh heh heh.”

“How? Not even the hacker festival has escaped this intact.”

“You just don’t get it, Truth. All that matters is that I can walk by your side.”

Mh.

She started showing off how cute she was. Did I need to give that precocious girl some points for artistry?

The mountain we were walking to was in the same city, so it did not take that long.

“How do we make this unheard-of mystery agency seem realistic?” asked Anastasia.

“Instead of creating the kind of spy organization seen in movies, it would seem more real if it started with something more clichéd. I mean, the major corporations that created global OSs, computers, and social networks all began as niche groups of geeks, right?”

“What do you suggest?”

“Let’s see. How about the online lobby for an outdated puzzle game? They login, but no one’s playing the game and they’re only discussing the end of the world. But they communicate using terms and facial animations only used in the game, so no one was able to pick up on it.”

“...You were right about it being niche.”

“We’ll have to flesh it out by saying they were actually wealthy people with

too much time on their hands and the whole Absolute Noah thing started with them uniting the shelters they had prepared in their own yards.”

“But do that and it’ll become an organization with a surprisingly short history. Then you can’t say it started when the founding member saw that great holy man hung up on the cross, or something like that.”

“It only has to be the top level organization that controls the Bright Cross and Absolute Noah in this day and age. We just have to say this independent and rising group took control of the entire organization.”

“So a merger led to the total change of an organization with a long history, hm?”

“It happens a lot, right? It’s a cruel world.”

“Like with computer motherboards! As soon as they get some weird capital injection, the contents of the brand-name machines changes entirely!!”

“...Did you end up with some weird machine again? Like when you buy a tower machine, but all the expansion slots are already full?”

Meanwhile, we entered the winding road up the mountain. There were fallen drones even out here, but there weren’t as many as in the downtown area.

The communication tower in question was visible from quite a ways away. The tall structure of steel beams rose up from the top of the wall of mountains surrounding our isolated city.

“Uheh. We have to climb the entire mountain!?”

“The signal can travel the furthest from the peak, so of course they’re going to take advantage of that height if they can get it.”

“A-are there cable cars or some other elegant and high-society way of getting up there?”

“That’s like taking the elevator to the top floor of a building being held by gunmen. C’mon, Anastasia, didn’t you say this was the perfect time for a walk?”

“Uhehh. Hiking in the mountains? I’m too old for a field trip.”

“Anastasia, can you count for me how old you are on your fingers?”

“I don’t have 11 fingers!” she shouted back.

No mysterious masked group had set up a checkpoint on the way, so we climbed the mountain road with ease.

“Ugh.”

“Anastasia?”

“Ugh.”

...This was not good. My little typhoon could only say “ugh”. I doubted her shoes were meant for walking long distances, so her feet may have been hurting.

“Ugh. Truuuuth...”

“Yes, yes, princess. If you’re fine with being carried on my back.”

“I don’t like the way you put that. Maybe I should have you princess carry me.”

“I don’t want to do that on a mountain road. It really hurts your hips.”

“Wait, have you done that for someone before!?”

...I decided not to mention that my experience was mostly with carrying my sleepy and spoiled Vampire sister and shoving her in the coffin below her queen-sized bed. I had to preserve her dignity.

I also had experience carrying people on my back. When my Zombie sister was truly angry, she would not throw a fit. She would curl up and refuse to move. But if I carried her on my back like a tow truck, she would cheer up pretty quickly.

“This feels like smelling another girl’s perfume...”

Anastasia had her say despite clinging to my back. She was quite the selfish princess for a Silky maid fairy that was meant to serve an old family.

I continued up the mountain while carrying Anastasia who was light but soft. She was only 11, so it didn’t feel like I was carrying a whole person. It was about the same as a backpack after you got carried away and packed it too full.

I took a short break at the roadside station along the way. It was deserted due

to the drone attacks, but vending machines were a wonderful thing.

I didn't care about the diet label anymore, so I bought the world's most famous carbonated beverage.

"Japan is a great country, but one major flaw is the weak carbonation."

"Just like the exhaust from cars and factories, if you filter it clean before sticking it in the drink, it won't contribute to global warming."

We tossed the empty plastic bottle in the trash can and started back up the mountain. And without saying a word, Anastasia clung to my back like that was her official spot.

It was not far to the communication tower now.

I was not so much taking a leisurely walk as I was lowering my pace to preserve my stamina for what was to come once we arrived.

"We're almost there now."

"Ugh."

"Don't give me that, Anastasia. Hey, quit nibbling at my neck. And don't rub your cheek against me."

"...Oniii-chaaan."

"Sorry, but that's not going to work on me. I'm more than used to it from Ayumi. Although she doesn't actually bite me."

"Tch. You damn bourgeoisie."

The princess finally lowered herself from my back.

Now.

Absolute Noah would be able to hire a sniper or two with ease and I wouldn't be surprised to find a supernatural Archenemy lying in wait. That might sound unrealistic, but I really had run across Itou Tamago and that Valkyrie in the past.

I had no idea how useful it would be, but we crouched low as we slowly made our way to the peak.

But...

“...Huh? There’s no one here.”

We had arrived.

The metal tower was made from a complex arrangement of steel beams and it stood about as tall as a three-story building. In addition to the partially-underground space built into the concrete foundation, there was a room similar to a viewing platform on the higher part of the tower.

“That just happens some days, right? Not everything is going to be under Absolute Noah’s control.”

That was true enough and it was possible all of Absolute Noah’s VIPs were holed up inside their ark and letting the outside world do as it pleased.

“This is bad. Seeing things go so smoothly only worries me.”

“User, you were always the type that prefers to have someone step on him than to step on someone else, so doesn’t this just mean you are back to your normal self?”

“...Truth, would you have preferred it if I rode you like a horse instead of clinging to your back?”

The tower was smaller than I had expected. They may have gotten the height they needed just by placing it on the mountain peak. And making it too tall would shift the center of gravity higher, causing it to sway during earthquakes or strong winds.

There were two ways to the top: the metal stairway on the outside, or the work elevator in the exposed center. Both of them were only built for one or two people to use.

There was also a metal box about the size of a vaulting box.

“Is that the emergency power?” suggested Anastasia.

“It’s little better than one for a festival stand, so they could never support communication equipment with that. Are they only thinking of keeping the heat on long enough for rescue to arrive during a blizzard?”

We first entered the partially-underground building at the base. It was not locked.

“Is this a breakroom or night duty room?”

“Maybe.”

There was a TV, a table, a fridge, and a microwave. There were also a few bunkbeds. There was a door in the back, but it only led to a bathroom.

There was no communication equipment there.

...That meant it had to be up top.

The elevator rose through the center of the tower, but we could not board it from here. You apparently had to go outside and board it from the roof of the partially-underground area.

I found a metal toolbox in a corner of the room, so I grabbed it.

“We should probably take the stairs.”

“Truth, will you give me a leg massage afterwards?”

We walked back outside and approached the metal stairway on the outside of the tower. I had thought just three stories wouldn't be bad, but it felt like so much more. Being on the mountaintop gave it so much more height. When the wind blew, it creaked disconcertingly and I began having second thoughts.

“Why do the platforms have to be made of a wire mesh of all things!? This is just dangerous!”

“In case you are serious, that would be to reduce the weight and material costs while also allowing rising winds to pass through,” said Maxwell.

“This design completely ignores the rights of girls in skirts...” complained Anastasia.

I was pretty sure you would need a telescope to peep up at her from the surface, but Anastasia still pressed her legs together and held down her skirt.

The top level was a square room with a railinged viewing platform surrounding it. You can think of it like a square fried-egg shape. All four sides of the room were made of glass, so it reminded me of an airport control tower or viewing platform.

“Bingo.”

One glance in through the glass was enough. I could see wireless communication equipment and a server the size of a refrigerator.

This room was locked, but it might as well not have been. I pulled an L-shaped crowbar from the toolbox, stuck the short end into the crack between the door and the wall, and used leverage to destroy the lock.

“They probably just want to make sure animals can’t turn the knob and get in.”

“Industrial server machines are expensive, but it’s not hard to track where they came from since not many places sell them.”

We went inside.

It felt a bit cramped what with the elevator in the middle, but it felt sturdier to have a solid floor below us. The actual height had not changed, but humans were easily tricked.

“Uheh. The elevator uses a trapdoor-style door and isn’t actually sealed,” said Anastasia. “They use the floor of the actual elevator to cover it up. The place has to be full of drafts during the winter.”

“It looks like they make up for that with proper heating equipment. Look.”

“?”

“It looks fairly stylish with the glass tank, but that water tank is for a heater, right?”

“Oh, now that you mention it. With the weird lighting, I thought they were raising tropical fish or something.”

“More importantly, let’s check out the communication system. We need to decide whether we’re going to mess with the antenna, the wiring, or the server.”

If this place picked up all of the wireless communications in the mountains, it would handle all kinds of signals: every single phone carrier, disaster radios, community radio, endangered animal trackers, *etc.* So if we were going to cut in anywhere, it would have to be the signal switcher or line multiplexer that connected the multiple devices.

“There we go. Looks like 8 different hard wires. We won’t have to pull out some wire cutters and strip the cords.”

“Truth, what about the antenna outside?”

“We’ll do that in parallel. Maxwell, what frequency are the encrypted signals using?”

“60.5 megahertz. They are intentionally avoiding the local FM stations.”

“That would be a normal parabolic antenna. Let’s step outside and check the direction of the dishes.”

The antennas were attached the railing of the viewing platform surrounding the room. They were like a larger version of the satellite dishes seen on people’s balconies.

“...The dam is that way, so...this one.”

“There should be two lines,” said Anastasia. “One between the dam and the tower and one between the tower and outside the city.”

“This just means we have to find an identical antenna.”

“Even if we can find a spare antenna below, how are you going to attach it?”

“Wrapping some wires around it should work.”

There was more to making cyber attacks than staring at a computer screen in a dimly-lit room.

“How are you planning on blocking the signal?”

“Aluminum foil would work, but that microwave below suggests there isn’t a kitchen here.”

“Then how about you grab a blanket from the break room and soak it in water in the bathroom?”

“That’s it.”

What we had to do was simple. First, we grabbed a spare antenna from the room below and attached it right next to the antenna aimed outside the city. After hooking up the equipment which needed a cable, we just had to wait on standby with the soaked blanket.

“Maxwell, write up a fake message for us. Make it look like it was sent from Absolute Noah’s top level group.”

“I can do that, but our message will be open to everyone since we have not cracked their encryption.”

“We’re not sending it to anyone that actually knows them, so that’s fine. Let’s choose the partial VIPs who won’t be able to tell its fake and send it to all of them. Maxwell, access New York or London’s stock exchange. Grab the people or groups with the 100 most expensive transactions and locate their contact information. Their registered or public contact point for trading shouldn’t be that hard to find.”

“Sure.”

“...You make that sound like nothing, but you’re seriously going to cause a financial crisis here,” said Anastasia.

“What should I have the message say?” asked Maxwell.

““Absolute Noah’s messenger is planning mergers with some well-known corporations, so keep your hands off. ...If we make it sound like the group running that ark has a long-term plan for the next 5 or 10 years, no one will think the Calamity is right around the corner. It might be temporary, but that will help calm down the world. That will put a stop to the chain-reaction from Wild@Hunt’s collapse and prevent the real Calamity from happening.”

“What genre of corporation should the alleged mergers use?”

“Dig through the digital edition of some business magazines. Anastasia, got any interesting ideas?”

“In the States, I’ve heard the screen movie industry is secretly gathering power to fight back against home VR equipment.”

“Then let’s make this a counter-investment in VR. Something like spending 5 or 10 years fully archiving world heritage sights so people can visit them as much as they want for a monthly fee.”

“Sure. I can make it so they are speculatively buying up every such company, correct?”

Once we had the text to send, it was finally time to take action.

We had two identical antennas pointed in the exact same direction. If we simply sent out the powerful signal, we could jam the original signal, but we wanted something more reliable. We couldn't afford failure here.

"Give me the countdown."

When I heard the electronic beeping, I threw the wet blanket over the original antenna like I was hanging it out to dry.

Water could block EM signals.

That was how they got the data on clouds and rain used for the weather forecast.

At the same time, we sent the fake signal from the identical spare antenna.

"Switchover complete. Our transmission will be confused for Absolute Noah's."

"The real one is probably panicking right now."

But there was nothing they could do at this point. No matter how much Absolute Noah shouted that it was a fake message and demanded everyone believe them, their antenna was covered by the wet blanket. When their signal could not get out, their voice could not reach anyone.

"This would have worked differently in the city where fiber optic cable is laid out everywhere, but focusing all the mountain's signals onto this one tower is just an unhealthy setup."

At any rate, this would stop them for a while. Borrowing someone else's authority to trick the world with a sedative was about the worst method we could use, but we had to stop the Calamity from occurring.

"Hey, Truth. How do we check to see if it worked?"

"Searches for 'flu' apparently rise dramatically in areas where the flu is spreading. Maxwell, check for the distribution of searches related to moral hazards."

"The designated area is the entire world in this case, but the number of

searches is showing signs of falling. The fall began near the source of the false signal and it appears to be accelerating as the message is distributed second and third hand.”

“So that settles it. Now we just have to watch it play out.”

I finally breathed a sigh of relief and slumped down on the wire mesh viewing platform.

Anastasia wiped sweat from her brow.

“Then let’s get out of here,” she said. “Absolute Noah isn’t going to be happy we borrowed their name for this.”

“You’re right...”

This would hurt my stepmom’s standing after she stubbornly and forcibly insisted I be allowed on the ark. She might even directly confront me.

One problem inevitably led to another.

I didn’t even want to think about a confrontation with a family member, but I couldn’t back down on this. It looked like I would have to use that conflict to solidify my position.

With that in mind, I finally started to stand back up. But...

With a loud metallic scraping, orange sparks flew from the metal railing right next to my face.

It took me a while to realize what had happened.

But a moment later, I heard a fireworks-like explosive sound from the distance. It seemed to echo in my ears and Anastasia managed to react before I did.

“A sniper!? Truth!!”

“!!”

That was her American upbringing for you. But her reaction was not the best. She must have wanted to get inside because she raised her head and looked toward the door, so I had to grab her slender hand and pull her behind the parabolic antenna.

Where did that come from, dammit!?

“Maxwell, use the scratches on the railing to calculate the angle of fire and use the delay of the noise to calculate the distance!”

“Sure. The direction was south-southwest with an inclination of 14 degrees. Assuming the standard speed of sound, the distance would be about 800 meters. Doubling or tripling the speed of sound will double and triple that distance.”

We had no projectile weapons, so the most we could do was find safe ground. And if we knew the direction the bullet came from, we would know which direction to keep our shield in!

Anastasia complained while just going along with my instructions.

“What, is it Absolute Noah? I thought they were all closed up in their ark!”

It almost felt like a response.

Another shot produced sparks as it fired diagonally up from below the wire mesh.

But wait...!!

“Maxwell!”

“That was a completely different direction from before.”

Was there more than one sniper? I couldn't think of a scenario much worse than being surrounded here!!

I felt a chill down my spine, but an even odder problem stood in our way.

“Truth! Hey, Truth!”

“What is it?”

“Using the standard speed of sound, the direction was south-southwest, the inclination was 15 degrees, and the distance was 800 meters. I have that correct, don't I?”

“What about-...?”

“But there's nothing but a cliff there.”

...What?

I looked over in surprise and found she was right. There was nowhere for a sniper there. Doubling or tripling the speed of sound would double or triple the distance...but that was meaningless. There was only empty space there and nothing to stand on. Unless they could float in midair, firing from that angle simply wasn't possible!

"There were no mistakes in my calculations. That is the only possible trajectory given the marks on the railing."

And yet that didn't match what we saw...

If I started to doubt Maxwell's answers, we were done for. Anastasia was a Silky, but she was not a violent Archenemy who would come in handy during combat. And I was only human. If we lost the machine's support, we couldn't put up any sort of resistance.

"Truth, Maxwell isn't built to lie. So that leaves two possibilities."

"Which are?"

"Some outside interference is affecting Maxwell's calculations, or this sniper can break the laws of physics."

"...So it's either a hacker or an Archenemy!?"

"It could also be a supernatural hacker who is both."

Either way, this could not be more trouble.

"A hacker is a possibility, but I would like to suggest it is unlikely," said Maxwell. "If a third party had taken full control of me, I doubt they would rely on a sniper. They would cut the power to the communication tower so you could not send your signal to the outside world."

...In that case, it was more likely this sniper could use magic bullets. Could they manipulate the path of the bullets in flight, or could they fly through the air like a bird as they aimed their rifle?

This was not enough to know what kind of Archenemy they were. But without knowing that, I couldn't find a way to fight back or escape!

What hints did we have?

I wanted to sort through our information.

“...We can’t see the sniper.”

“?”

“The direction and angle are odd. We can hear the actual gunfire. So we should be able to trust the distance...”

“Truth, get to the point!”

“We were thinking about this wrong. Assuming the sniper is far away is exactly what they want!”

If I was right, hiding behind cover was meaningless. They would just calculate out a working line of fire and circle around to there. We had to strike back before that happened!!

“Maxwell, you have control of the communication tower, right? Can you produce light or sound!?”

“I have found disaster announcement speakers, night work stadium lights, and a blank-firing device for scaring away harmful wildlife.”

“Use all of it on my signal. I need to distract them for just a moment!”

The tower gave off multiple explosive sounds and bright lights in every direction. The effect was less than in the dead of night, but it would still shock someone if they were not expecting it.

I was glad I had brought that toolbox with me. I didn’t have time to search for the perfect hammer or crowbar. I simply swung around the entire metal box.

I smashed the glass of the room containing the communication equipment and pushed Anastasia’s small body inside. Just as I started to climb inside, something tore through the air.

There was now a hole in the thick glass where I had not broken it. It was like the tip of an umbrella had pierced it.

And the unseen “bullet” kept its momentum as it raced across the room and destroyed the clear container that looked like a tropical fish tank but was

actually for a fashionable heater.

“?”

Anastasia gasped after being pushed inside first. Water resistance was good at stopping bullets. It did not fully stop, but it was slowed enough to be seen with the naked eye.

It was not a handgun or rifle bullet.

It was not made of lead, or even of tungsten or depleted uranium.

Yes...

“A...fairy?”

Anastasia’s lips and tongue formed the answer.

Our opponent was an Archenemy the size of my little finger with clear, dragonfly-like wings.

That only lasted a moment.

The small fairy had been slowed by the water, but her small body soon vanished once more. She must have flown back out of the defenseless communication tower surrounded by clear glass and had started building up speed again.

“That explains it... That explains why the shots kept coming from those ridiculous angles! It was more like a bird than a bullet!!”

There were many different kinds of fairies, but if my guess was correct, this sniping required two different abilities.

The ability to fly under her own power and the ability to freely change her body’s mass.

That did not leave many options. And since I had seen a full girl with dragonfly wings, there was really only one possibility.

“A Sylpheed...”

When the alchemic element of wind was anthropomorphized into a wind spirit, it was known as a Sylph. The female-exclusive form of that was a Sylpheed.

“But what was with that acceleration!? Using yourself as a sniper rifle bullet is crazy even for an immortal!”

“Keep your head down, Anastasia. The basic principle is simple.” I held down her whitish-blond head. “Listen. A Sylpheed is an anthropomorphized element. It could be a molecule, an atom, a particle, or whatever. Even when gathered together into a larger mass, a Sylpheed remains a Sylpheed as long as no other elements are mixed in. That means she can freely change her apparent size and weight.”

“Truth, keep up that awful riddle format and I’ll bite your arm!”

“It would seem I am not the only one irritated by my user’s stage performances. Phew.”

Does no one have any patience!?

“To get straight to the point, it’s the same as a tank gun’s armor-piercing round! If the Sylpheed accelerates in a larger form and then reduces her mass, the massive kinetic energy will be focused on a smaller point. Tank guns do the same thing by having the outer shell break away after firing so just the tungsten steel dart in the center keeps going! That’s what I mean!!”

From there, she just made a powerful tackle.

It was a shockingly aggressive use of an Archenemy’s immortal body.

“Why is a freak like that flying around out here?” asked Anastasia. “Aren’t all the important people inside Absolute Noah!?”

“Don’t ask me. Maybe she wants to kill me to cheer herself up, maybe she wants to convince my stepmom to open the door for her, or maybe she’s loyal enough to sacrifice herself if it means eliminating anyone who would threaten the ark!”

She was small, but she was still as big as my little finger. Since we heard the supersonic boom after she reached us, she could probably punch through our bodies even if we wore a bulletproof vest.

Meanwhile, the Sylpheed did not seem to be perfect. If she could maintain supersonic speeds at all times, we would have been turned to Swiss cheese

already.

“She probably takes a lot of time to build up speed along a straight-line path of a few hundred meters or even a few kilometers. She starts accelerating from a distance where a person looks smaller than a grain of rice and then reduces her mass to use that kinetic energy before entering within our eyesight. Then she uses her wings for some final course corrections as she charges in. That’s my guess anyway.”

“But this is an elevated communication tower with no cover surrounding it and the walls are made of fragile glass,” said Maxwell. “With the risk of being shot from any direction, should you really be looking so smug?”

“Oh, this look is warranted. We have enough information to strike back. And I’ve already given you the answer.”

“Chomp.”

Anastasia went through with her threat and actually bit my arm with her small mouth. I hadn’t expected much from a child, but it really hurt!

“Ana-bh!? An...wait...Ana-gowahhh!?”

“Chomp, chomp. ...Did you just call me a type of sushi?”^[1]

And when did I say we had time to joke around, you worthless hacker maid fairy!?

“Maxwell, perform a ballistic calculation. Use the broken glass to work out the Sylpheed’s penetrative power!!”

I grabbed the toolbox, held Anastasia close, and pressed my back against one of the fridge-sized server machines.

“Truth, she’ll be able to see us here!”

“So what? She’s using her body as a bullet, so I doubt she’ll send herself flying into steel beams, concrete, or anything else she can’t break through. We can limit her angle of fire!”

That meant there would be no sniper fire from straight ahead or behind. If she wanted to avoid punching through me and hitting the server machine behind me, she would choose to come from either the left or the right.

And neither of those windows was broken yet.

Would it be right or left?

Not even an Archenemy could entirely ignore the laws of physic, so would it be right? If she simply wanted a stable trajectory, she would use the tailwind!

“The bullet passed through the glass before the impact could propagate through the glass surface, so she would be about equivalent to a 5.56 or a 7.62. If it was any more powerful, the shockwave surrounding the bullet itself would break the glass.”

“Truth, what is that!?”

“Rubber adhesive!!”

I would have preferred a proper filter, but I couldn't be picky. I used a nail to split open the side of what looked like a toothpaste tube and threw it at the window.

The contents splattered across the window like I had thrown a water balloon at it.

At the same time, the finger-sized fairy slammed full force into the middle of the glass.

Even easily-broken glass could be made bulletproof by attaching a clear sheet to the surface.

But was it simply not enough!?

“!!”

She had been slowed down quite a bit. That was obvious since I could see the bullet herself with my naked eye. But even a hunting slingshot could cause disaster if it hit you square in the forehead from close range. However, I used that moment to open the server machine's maintenance door. She still pierced through the metal door which was only as thick as the door of a cleaning locker, but this was metal. It was hard but also soft. It must have altered her trajectory because she passed right by my face.

The Sylpheed broke through the disaster radio box on the table and finally slowed enough to fall to the floor.

And I wasn't going to let her escape again!!

With that in mind, I grabbed the toolbox. I swung it around to scatter its contents. Those would be like falling boulders to the finger-sized fairy, but that wasn't the point.

I raised the emptied toolbox.

And as the Sylpheed finally opened her mouth as if to say something, I slammed it down over her. I then stepped on top of the toolbox like I was trapping a mouse below an upside-down bucket.

"T-Truth!? Are you sure that's enough!?"

"I said she has to fly hundreds of meters or even a few kilometers to build up speed, right? That means we could capture her with a plastic bottle or a birdcage when she's lost her momentum."

So as long as we stopped her within arm's reach, we had won.

I spoke to her with my foot still on the toolbox.

"That means it's time for a peaceful discussion. Do not attack us again. Now, are you willing to continue this talk?"

"..."

"No? Fine then. Anastasia, grab some spare glue from the contents scattered on the floor. We'll fill in the gaps with that and then leave."

"O-okay!" said the Sylpheed.

"While it won't kill an Archenemy, asphyxiation still can't be pleasant. In fact, it's probably even more painful. And stagnant air is probably unbearable for a wind fairy."

"I said okay! Are you listening? Hey!!"

...I still couldn't let my guard down, but did I have control of this discussion?

"Answer our questions honestly."

"A fairy's weight and measurements aren't all that interesting. They're all really small."

“I rejected the ticket my stepmom arranged for me and I stayed outside. Then I used Absolute Noah’s name to send a message around the world. Not even Amatsu Yurina will be shaken now. Even if I cry and scream and even if I’m covered in blood, she’ll deal with me as Demon Lord Lilith. She won’t open the door. So why target me?”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Amatsu Satori, your argument is entirely based on emotion, but that means you aren’t aware of your own value.”

“?”

“The power to connect with anyone with no discrimination whatsoever is enough to change history. Just like everyone calls their own child a genius, a lot of people talk about ideals, but very few can live up to them.”

...Did that mean there was a purely pragmatic reason my stepmom was so fixated on me? Enough to place me in the group of a few thousand chosen from 7 billion? Nonsense. I wasn’t a great king or anything.

“Well, that’s how they see you. So has that Silky standing next to you sensed the power and possibility found in Amatsu Satori?”

“Anastasia?”

For some reason, she did not answer. In fact, she refused to look me in the eye.

“Amatsu Yurina *will* open the door if she knows the power and possibility of Amatsu Satori will be taken from the world.”

“Why are you so fixated on that ark? The extreme global moral hazard of the Calamity was stopped! A few decades or centuries later might be different, but there’s no need to escape into Absolute Noah right this instant, is there!?”

“You still don’t get it?”

“Get what!?”

“It is true the outside Calamity was stopped. Stopped by you. But there is one area that did not receive that benefit: inside.”

...?

I could not quite grasp what she meant. Outside and inside? Of what???

That was when it happened.

Maxwell gave a report from the card-sized car navigation system.

“Warning: User, I have picked up a transmission from Absolute Noah.”

“Well, yeah. They’ve been sending out plenty of signals encrypted too strongly for us to crack. But we cut off the connection from the communication tower to outside the city with that wet towel.”

“No. That is not what I meant. It is a direct message to this communication tower and it is meant for you.”

“Who is it from?”

“Assuming no deception, it appears to be from Miss Amatsu Erika.”

“Erika?”

It was true she would have been brought to Absolute Noah. My stepmom had been driving her around in the back of that semi truck during the day, so a Vampire like her would have been helpless.

“What is it, Erika? Are you okay!?”

“Kssh...ksshhh. Sato...ri...-kun...”

What was this?

Her voice was really scratchy. An unbelievable amount of money and technology had to have gone into that ark, so this was not at all what I expected.

“I’m relieved that you seem safe. Ow... Don’t worry about...us.”

“Erika?”

No, was that not it? Was it not an issue with the equipment or signal? Was Erika’s voice actually scratchy inside of Absolute Noah...?

“Wait a second, Erika! I thought it was supposed to be safe in the ark!? What is happening in there? O-oh, right. What happened to Ayumi? What about mom and dad!?”

“Ksh, kssh.”

“Erika!?”

“We’re...fine. I will...protec...Ayumi...-cha... So...Sato...-kun. I’m glad...could hear...voice...one last...kssssssshhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!”

There was nothing more.

I didn’t understand. What in the world was happening there!?

I heard the Sylpheed’s voice underneath the upside-down toolbox.

“I did not want to have them open the door to save myself.”

“...”

“I needed the door opened so I could protect Lady Charlotte who I have sworn loyalty to.”

...When I thought about it, it had been odd.

Absolute Noah is dangerous, so stay away and call for help. That I would have understood. But because she wanted to hear my voice? Saying that before ending the transmission would only worry me more, so it was like luring me into that deadly ark.

Erika would never do that normally.

Even if she was on the edge of the precipice, she would not speak a word to me so I wouldn’t do anything unnecessary, no matter how much she might really want me to.

But it was not that she had been careless. It was more like she had lost control of herself. That calm and composed older sister had slipped into it so smoothly that she wasn’t even aware of what she was doing.

In other words, something was spreading throughout the ark.

“The Calamity has begun. But with an unexpected location, scale, and conditions.”

My heart pounded like an alarm bell as the fairy spoke as coldly as someone announcing a death sentence.

“But there is no way to open the door from outside. At this rate, everyone we care for will be destroyed.”

[Support by] Absolute Noah [DELTA brain]

A giant structure said to rest deep below the Kukyou Dam. It is referred to as an ark for convenience, but it is still not known if it is a building or a craft. The fact that such a massive system remains entirely unsearchable in this highly digitized society actually gives it a powerful presence.

Also, since the Absolute Noah 04 below Las Vegas's Hoover Dam was modeled after it, that might help make some predictions.

The mixed group of humans and Archenemies that we could call the Ark Faction see Absolute Noah as the one and only facility that will allow them to survive the Calamity, so they may view it as a target of worship. As its identity is still unknown, I cannot simulate whether its specs could actually overcome the Calamity, but it is true that VIPs from around the world have plotted in secret over that ark and quite a few of them have fallen in the process. Since the wealthy who could have lived lives devoid of failure or defeat are so willing to throw away their lives, they may be something about it that suggests a certain rarity.

Chapter 7

The one and only stroke of luck was that Absolute Noah was likely located below Kukyou Dam. That was in the mountains and not far from the communication tower.

“T-Truth. Are you sure this is okay?”

“I’m not exactly happy about it either, but Sylpheed knows the most about Absolute Noah. We have no choice.”

History’s worst tackling sniper fairy was flying around me while still the size of my little finger.

“Can’t you take a human-sized form if you gather enough of your element?”

“Fairies are supposed to be cute.”

We both wanted to pry open Absolute Noah’s door and rescue the people inside, so would we be able to work together for now?

“I can show you to the bottom of the dam, but that’s as far as my authority goes. I can’t open or close Absolute Noah’s door.”

“But there has to be a way,” I replied. “I don’t know when Absolute Noah was planned, when it was completed, or how long it was stored here. But they wouldn’t have just left it to sit until ‘the day’ arrived. Just like an old abandoned house, structures and equipment quickly fall apart when no one lives there. They would have people living there even if just to provide maintenance.”

“What about it, Truth?”

“...Let’s say one of those lowly managers betrays the organization and holes up inside on their own. Would they just cry themselves to sleep because Absolute Noah had been taken from them? Not a chance. They must have some emergency method of opening the door from outside.”

We discussed it while walking along the mountain road. The forest eventually cleared out and we arrived at a large body of water.

This was Kukyou Dam.

...The locals treated it like it was haunted. It was said there were a lot of suicides, that photos and videos would unnaturally blur, and that media crews reporting on it would eventually find themselves in a mental hospital. There apparently was an actual news article about a mayor a few generations back jumping into it, so that may have led to the infamy of the area.

As a dam, it reminded me of Las Vegas's Hoover Dam, but this was very different from that. It of course could not hope to match the American size of building a reservoir lake in the middle of the desert that rivalled Lake Biwa in size, but that isn't what I'm referring to.

It was surrounded by dense forest and a sticky humid air. With all the leaves floating in the water, it looked like there was a stagnant film across the surface and the old concrete walls were covered in greenish mold and moss.

...This was the source of the water that flowed from the faucet. Was I simply being influenced by the ghost stories and the data that someone had once floated lifelessly in there? I wasn't a health-conscious young wife who loved yoga and warm vegetables, but I found myself longing for mineral water packaged in a bottle.

"I see. This is well-suited for Archenemies."

"Anastasia?"

"Have you forgotten, Truth? I was originally an immortal that resides in old mansions."

"...All I remembered was that you're a tiny maid fairy who has the nerve to wear all silk."

"Bow wow!! Grrr...!!"

Whoa!? She started threatening me with some American-style barking, so I kept my distance. I seriously hoped she hadn't gotten a taste for biting me!!

"There are three overall sections." The finger-sized Sylpheed sounded

exasperated as she flew around. “The reservoir lake with the arched dam in the center, the hydroelectric power plant that uses the difference in water level, and the communication facility that sends out data on the water quality and water level.”

“But that isn’t all. Right? There has to be a black box that allows them to send in all the personnel and equipment needed to protect the place without leaving any oddities in the paperwork.”

“Some leisure facilities are being constructed alongside the reservoir lake. They’re lakeside things like a fishing hole and a driving range, but with the investigations into effects on water quality, reports on the suicides, sightings of endangered animals, and more, the construction still isn’t complete after a decade. The government office is full of documents and they think it’s no different from some year-end roadwork. That means no one suspects a thing when workers and heavy equipment come and go from the area.”

...But in reality, the plastic sheets covering the site would be full of mercenaries and armored vehicles equipped for the mountains. And those mercenaries would be a mix of human and Archenemy. That was frightening in a different way from the ghost stories.

Anastasia sounded exasperated too.

“They intentionally made it outside construction to avoid drawing unwanted attention to the dam itself, didn’t they? It’s basically the same method used by Congress and gangs.”

If you were only working on the surface of the dam, you might not come across the term Absolute Noah. But that was sad in its own way.

“Just to be sure, we can reach Absolute Noah’s door if we’re with you, right?” I asked Sylpheed. “We won’t just get shot?”

“...With the name Amatsu Satori, we could probably get the door open and reach the depths of Absolute Noah itself.”

“That would be great if true, but after what I did, the ID I never asked for may have been frozen. Sylpheed, we’re relying on you for authorization. Will that work?”

“In that case, Truth...”

“Yes, we need to get to Absolute Noah. Let’s check it out.”

If Las Vegas’s Absolute Noah 04 had been modeled after this as a trap, the structure should be somewhat similar. It was probably at the bottom of the reservoir lake.

We entered the thick concrete building.

A finger-sized fairy guided us, but this dream world was too nightmarish to call a fairy tale.

“...There are people in here,” said Anastasia. “Did the workers not run away during the drone attack?”

“Maybe they didn’t need to when they were already surrounded by thick concrete.”

We passed some men and women in work jumpsuits, but they did not respond to our presence. Not only did we have a finger-sized fairy with us, but the cornerstone of the city’s water infrastructure should have restricted all outsiders from entry. I sensed some kind of implicit understanding here.

We took a few narrow stairways and work elevators further and further down. Until...

“Here? But it only looks like a jumbled mess of machinery.”

“There is an S-shaped path through it. Don’t worry about the steam coming from the pipes. It isn’t actually hot.”

I never would have approached this if she had not told me that. I twisted my body to weave through the gaps and then turned a corner into a large passageway.

We reached an open space.

There was a thick round metal door reminiscent of the door to a bank vault. It really did look like what I had seen below the Hoover Dam.

“...Absolute Noah.”

“Specifically, #00.”

But this one wasn't a bluff. The wall was thick. When I touched it, it didn't open as a flimsy door like at #04

"Maxwell, I want to mess with the wiring to open the door's lock."

"That is too little information to guide your actions."

"There has to be a way to open it from outside. That means the wiring must extend outside the door."

I thought for a bit.

"Check the earthquake-resistance measures or the base-isolation structure."

"What do you mean, Truth?"

"You might not know since the West doesn't get many earthquakes, but when something is shaken, making it harder and heavier actually has the opposite effect. It's more efficient to use dampers or guiderails to let it move like a pendulum, allowing the shaking to escape. But if you have fiber optic cables running through the walls, you can't have them caught between or pulled by the shaking walls. There has to be excess space inside the wall."

"I have found it."

"Check how far it extends. There should be an emergency unlocking console there."

The diagram displayed on the card-sized screen was our lifeline. We followed its guidance back the way we had come.

We found a contact point so inconspicuous that we had all walked right past it.

"...I see. A security camera, huh?"

I looked up to the ceiling at a corner of the passageway.

It was not well known, but those things were internet devices just like smartphones and cellphones. They were a part of the so-called IoT, so they could send emails and make phone calls. Or be infected by a virus. If you took over hundreds or thousands of them, you could send out a ton of data to bring down a site with a DDoS attack.

Since it was originally a camera, it could easily record the faces of anyone who approached and no one would question its presence. The wiring might be a little unusual, but the average person wouldn't check the plugs on the back of the camera. And the guard staring at the many monitors in the security room would not think about the state of each individual device unless there was an oddity on the screen. They would never notice someone had tampered with things on the back of the camera.

They were everywhere and yet no one really paid any attention to them, so no one knew what the proper wiring looked like. It was perfect for something like this.

"You just have to attach something to this, right?" Sylpheed flew around near my face. "But what? A hardware key, a fingerprint scanner, or maybe an oscilloscope or cathode-ray tube? There are as many electronic devices as there are stars in the sky."

"Maxwell, check the security room's camera footage archive. You can handle the 'official' security, can't you?"

"Sure. As far as I can tell from past footage, the camera is contacted at a regular pace of once every six months. It is always the same person and they appear to be holding a cable."

"Just a cable? ...What about the actual device?"

"They are holding the other end in their other hand, so I cannot tell you that. It is of course possible that they are hiding a stamp-sized device in their palm."

Anastasia slapped her forehead.

"Bioelectricity..."

"Isn't that too inexact for authorization? I'm not sure holding an exposed wire would provide a good enough signal to identify an individual."

"Then they might use a hand cream to increase the conductivity of their palm. It's a double analog lock using a combination of the individual's biometric signal and the special cream. It's a pretty good idea if they were worried about hackers like us."

“...”

“Unlike a fingerprint or an iris, you can’t acquire someone’s bioelectricity by chopping off a body part. There’s still the risk of someone using stem cells, but that’s where the special cream comes in. See? It really is a good idea.”

“But in that case...”

“We need the person and the witch’s ointment to unlock it. And we of course need them alive.”

...Now, could we really get our hands on those things?

If the person worked part-time, they might not be at the dam. If they had an Absolute Noah ticket, they might be beyond the door already. No, it was also possible the official members had put a bullet through their head before disappearing beyond the door.

What was the best option?

What did we need to investigate to get the key?

“...Oh, I get it.”

“Truth?”

“Maxwell, record that maintenance worker’s face and run a facial recognition search.”

“I can do that, but as they might be inside Absolute Noah, I cannot guarantee I can determine their present location.”

“Their current alibi doesn’t matter. I want to know their daily cycle. Like which section of the dam they work at and where their desk is.”

I naturally started speaking more quickly as I approached the answer.

“If they were in charge of such an important secret, they must have been terrified that their superiors would silence them. So they might have created some insurance for just such an occasion.”

“I am tracking them using facial recognition. Their ID data says they are Gindawara Masuzou, a 45-year-old man. He runs Kukyou Dam’s Water Quality and Water Level Management Section. I have found a passcode split into three

parts and disguised as garbage data in his desktop's system space and temporary file space."

"Wow did he ever break the rules," said Anastasia. "The analog lock is entirely pointless now."

"Combining the parts might create a Trojan horse to strike back at people like us, so be careful."

"Gindawara was no more than the key," said Maxwell. "Even if he unlocked the door from there, it would relock after 180 seconds. It was setup so he could not rebel and enter on his own."

"So it requires multiple actions to prevent someone from shutting themselves in like that. If they had that little trust in him, I can see why he felt the need for insurance."

This was a purely digital passcode instead of a biometric signal read from the palm. So with a simple addition to the back of the security camera, we could input our own signal remotely.

We only had to return to the large round door and wait for Maxwell's signal.

"Begin the countdown," said Maxwell. "The door's emergency unlocking procedure has begun. It will enter the relocking procedure after 180 seconds, so please pass through quickly."

"Understood."

Several metal rods thicker than my arm moved along the perimeter of the door to unlock it. With a loud buzzer, the door, which had to weigh several tons, opened outwards.

What awaited us through there?

What exactly was the Calamity?

I gulped and waited.

"Anastasia, Sylpheed, be caref-..."

"Truth, watch out!!!"

I never heard the rest of what Anastasia said.

A bestial roar stabbed into my ears as a beautiful blonde Vampire leaped toward me from the opened door with fangs bared...

[Support by] Vampires [DELTA brain]

Along with Zombies, they are likely the species with the closest connection to humans. They generally conceal themselves within cities and are inextricably tied to humans by their need to suck blood.

But while they have the intelligence to blend into human society, that does not mean they can be welcomed. For example, insect camouflage is used to deceive their prey, but that does not mean the two different kinds of bugs will get along. The Vampire's careful study of human life is not always evidence that they care about humans.

Miss Amatsu Erika seemed to have something unique to herself, but if an unknown error removed those restrictions, calculations based on previous experience may fail to predict her actions.

Chapter 8

To be honest, no one was able to react.

The Vampire Archenemy rushed at us completely out of the blue. It was my older sister, Amatsu Erika. An undead was attacking me with bloodshot eyes and I was only human. Anastasia was a maid fairy and the Sylpheed was a finger-sized fairy who could only use her sniping ability from a distance of several hundred meters to a few kilometers, so they could not fight indoors. That meant no one could stop my sister.

So.

When our lives were saved, it naturally came from someone else within Absolute Noah.

A slender arm grabbed my older sister's shoulder from behind while she made her charge. The accumulated inertial force did not matter. Erika's body was thrown back inside Absolute Noah like she was being sent back the way she came or like she had an invisible elastic cord around her neck.

We had been saved by...

"Ayumi!? You're hurt!!"

"Fuguu. Stay away from here, Onii-chan! The hell inside here isn't something a human should see!!"

Ayumi yelled back at me and then moved back inside. She disappeared into the depths. No, she was forced to fight back to make sure Erika did not get back up and attack again.

But what was that?

Why was my kind older sister growling like a beast!? What had happened inside the ark? Was the Calamity really that indiscriminate!?

“User, the door will relock in another 60 seconds. Whether you stay outside or go inside, make a choice you will not regret.”

Once it closed, there would be no opening it again. And if I went inside, I could not safely get back out.

But the choice was obvious.

“Sorry, Anastasia.”

“Oh, you are not going in there alone. If we’re doing this, we’re doing it together.”

“I only wanted to open the door so I could save Lady Charlotte. If things are even worse than I had thought, that is all the more reason to go in. What other choice do I have now?”

Whatever the case, we had no time.

We still could not accurately judge the risk, but we nevertheless stepped inside the hell that Absolute Noah had become...

The door closed behind us with an especially loud noise. There was no turning back now.

“So this is the place...”

Now that I had set foot inside the “real” ark, I found it was too large to imagine its overall form based on what I saw.

It was called a boat for convenience’s sake, but what was it really? A shelter, a rocket, or a submarine submerged in the dam? The interior was made up of windowless metal doors and lots of pipes, so it made me think of a warship tilted vertically. That said, it did not feel at all cramped and had to be even larger than a warship.

According to my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, they could only give out a few thousand tickets and the rest of the 7 billion people would be carried on to the next generation by having genetic samples kept in cold storage.

...But that meant this single facility had enough room for all the necessary

living space and storage facilities. Since a school could only hold a few hundred, this was definitely extraordinary. Even a nuclear aircraft carrier would have a hard job providing “sufficient” living space. If this really functioned as some kind of vehicle, it had to be a world record.

There was no sign of Ayumi or Erika.

But there were strange dents in the walls and floor. Not to mention dark red stains. I did not want to imagine which one of them had left those. It was inappropriate and wrong of me, but part of me was hoping that it came from a complete stranger.

“I wonder where everyone is,” said the finger-sized Sylpheed.

Everyone.

It shouldn’t have been surprising, but she used that one warm word to refer to all the people here. With the exception of my family, I viewed them all as complete and utter villains, but the Sylpheed would see it differently since she was here to save them.

In that case, her goal would be even more difficult than mine. I only had to save the few members of my family, but the Sylpheed had to save everyone.

Anastasia grabbed onto my clothes and spoke up.

“But...yes. This is strange. I don’t know how large a space this is, but there are thousands of people closed in here, right? Isn’t it eerily quiet for having a small village’s worth of people gathered in a single location?”

It was not that we had seen no signs of life.

At the very least, my Vampire older sister and Zombie little sister were still active.

But what about “everyone” else?

Where were the Absolute Noah members, including Amatsu Yurina?

And weren’t we forgetting something?

My sisters had a certain special trait.

They were a Vampire and a Zombie.

Those undead could spread at just about the worst rate imaginable.

“...It can’t be.”

A groaning voice left my mouth. It sounded like I had vocalized my cold sweat and it seemed to be revealing how I was already distrusting my own family.

“That can’t be!!”

“Ah, Truth! Stop!”

I could not even hear my small friend urging me to stop.

Ayumi and Erika were my precious family. I could not suspect them. Yet my mind kept churning away. It told me there was no other explanation. It told me it was most logical to assume those two had bitten everyone!

I had no idea what had triggered it. After all, this was the middle of enemy territory. Even if everyone around you was celebrating, wouldn’t you feel worried with thousands of fanatic end-times believers around you? Could you really tell yourself to hold back on using your weapon?

Of course not.

If I was an Archenemy, I wouldn’t have been able to bear it. I would have given into the pressure and started biting people to increase my numbers. I would have tried to secure my safety by stealing away the “power” of the majority.

So could I forgive my sisters for what they had done?

Could I just smile and accept it?

There were blood stains and scars of violence everywhere. Could I just accept that those Archenemies had silenced thousands of people to protect their own lives!?

“Uuh, ugh, bghbh, cough, cough!”

My tension and confusion grew to the point that I nearly vomited. I must not have swallowed the stomach acid very well because I felt a scorching pain in my esophagus.

I couldn’t do it.

I couldn't bear it.

Where was I? My vision had narrowed. There were steel walls and thick pipes everywhere. I didn't even know if this was a vehicle or a building, so how was I supposed to know what role this room played? What even was Absolute Noah? A spaceship? A submarine for a sunken world? A time machine? It was absurd, but shouldn't I assume a facility I had never seen before might be able to do things I had never seen before? Anything could be waiting for me up ahead. Anything could pop out from the shadows, from the gaps between shelves, or from the stains on the walls. Common sense no longer applied, so I had to defend myself on my own. I thought I was calmly cautious as I walked through a few doors, but...how odd. What was this? Why did I have a butcher's knife in my right hand?

Oh, right. This was a kitchen.

Did the time machine have a kitchen?

"...Sato...ri?"

I heard a scratchy voice.

I turned around and saw someone giving me a disbelieving look from the kitchen's entrance. It was Archenemy Lilith, one of the leaders at the center of the Absolute Noah group. My stepmom looked back and forth between my face and the knife in my hand.

?

After all her plotting, what could possibly make Amatsu Yurina look that shocked? I mean, it was surprising to find this bizarre facility had a kitchen, but with everything going on, wasn't it perfectly normal to grab a knife to defend yourself?

"Ahh, ahh."

But she was more flustered than I had ever seen her. Instead of struggling or shouting, she simply sank down to the floor.

And she spoke.

"Ahh! But Erika did nothing wrong. She was only indiscriminately threatening

everyone to protect me, Ayumi...and all the Archenemies from the humans' witch hunt!!"

...eh?

why would she bring up erika here???

and something felt off to me. a wet sensation and a rusty smell. something flowed down between the knife's grip and my hand. wet, so wet. when i grimaced and stared, i saw something placed on top of the cold silver countertop. no, something laid there. was it a large animal? or a fish maybe? it was too covered in red to tell, it was shaking just a bit, it didn't look at all like food, and i knew i shouldn't waste food, but even in that horrific state, it smiled and spoke.

"Don't worry... This isn't your fault, Satori-kun. You were just affected by the spreading mass insanity of the Calamity..."

ah.

ahh.

ahhh...

"Wha-...ah...eh?"

I immediately threw away the knife that clung to my palm with a strange stickiness. What...what in the world was happening!? Why did I have my older sister on the stainless steel countertop while I chopped her to pieces like a small child who had no idea how to cook!?

"Don't look, Satori!!"

Seeing my panic must have brought her back to her senses because my stepmom looked up and quickly shouted at me from the floor.

But it was too late.

The red below my fingernails disgusted me. What was that wet and squishily soft feeling on my palm? What had I done? What had happened during the blinding gap in my memories!? What had I done!?

"Thank...goodness."

Erika.

How can you smile after *this* happened!?

“I’m so glad...you managed to snap out of it...”

If she had wanted to, she could have easily fought back. She could have easily grabbed the knife and crushed it and my hand with it.

But she hadn’t.

She had refused to let anyone die. She would not let me die and she would not let me kill someone else. So she had continued to draw my attention while unable to attack someone as fragile as me. Because while I was busy destroying her, I could not turn that blade on someone else, like Ayumi or our stepmom.

So...

Even as it continued on and on...

“Satori!”

My stepmom hugged me so that her body blocked the view.

“This is the horror of the Calamity. It isn’t something you can fight on your own. The fear and confusion push explosively in from outside and there is nothing you can do. So, Satori, you don’t need to feel guilty!”

...What did that matter?

“I’m a Vampire...cough. So as long as...I’m not hit in the...heart and don’t have my head chopped...off, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. This won’t even leave a scar...”

...Was that supposed to lessen my crime here?

I had no memory of it. I had committed such a horrific crime, but the depths of my heart were still trying to pretend it hadn’t happened! I’m such a piece of shit!! I had such a remorseful look on my face, but I was trying to just forget any of it had happened!

Could I really go on living?

Right!? Could a creature as grotesque as this really be allowed to continue breathing!!!???

“No! Mom, attack Satori-kun! Cough, he’s going to bite his tongue!!”

“So it’s just like depression. The more serious and responsible the person, the more easily the Calamity pulls them down. I’m sorry, Satori!!”

Something wrapped around my neck.

At some point, my stepmom had moved behind me.

I felt something pulsing on the sides of my neck. The pulsing grew and grew until it seemed to fill my entire head. There was nothing I could do. The term “carotid artery” came to mind, but I was not a judo fighter. My already narrowed vision shrank further and was finally enveloped in darkness.

I felt a dull pain like my brain was being slowly massaged.

“Uuh...”

After I grimaced and groaned, I found Erika, Ayumi, and our stepmom staring down at me.

“Wah! Ahhhhhh!?”

Ahhh!?"

It was heartrending.

I was too much of a coward to get up, so I simply screamed. I showed off my weakness to try to earn their sympathy. Given who was the victim and who was the perpetrator, I should have bowed down in apology, but I robbed my sister of the right to be the weaker one.

"It's okay."

Her gothic lolita dress was in tatters and stained with lots of blood. That showed just how gruesome a scene it had been, but she still smiled kindly at me.

“You’re crying because of the regret and self-blame. That means you’re still a human being who loves us. So don’t be afraid. The world isn’t going to take anything more from you.”

No.

That wasn't what I wanted to say.

I tried to speak up, but my throat and tongue were shaking too much to form the words. But if it wasn't that, what was it? You coward. Did you really have the courage to accept the blame for what you did?

In the end, I had been hoping my family would smile and forgive me for breaking. There had been no other compromise for me.

I had tried to take the easy way out with death. I was enough of a fool to stop thinking there, so I had never thought of any option other than having someone else reach out to me.

I was a coward who had avoided facing the thorny path needed to make up for my crimes, so what good was trying to save face now?

"Sorry...Erika...I'm sorry..."

"It's okay."

She was not an idiot.

She had to have seen through it all as she smiled at me like that. And she would have done the same thing no matter how many times she was placed in the same situation. If the alternative was killing a family member, she would accept the blade. That was the noble path she would choose.

"Why did you come to Absolute Noah, Satori-kun? I can only imagine it was my indulgence. You heard me in the communication tower, didn't you? You heard me in a moment of weakness."

"..."

That was true.

But I didn't want to blame her here. This was my crime. I couldn't let anything else lighten that burden.

"I tried to drag you into this in that moment of weakness, Satori-kun. Even though I knew better than anyone what it was like in here. While wandering through this atmosphere of death, I just wanted to see you again and I didn't think about the consequences. There is no excuse for that. I don't want to place the blame on the Calamity."

...This was the power of the mysterious and formless Calamity.

It was a madness and violence that was explosively infectious. It had even worked its way into that noble sister's heart and created that moment of weakness.

I had stopped the chain reaction started from Wild@Hunt's collapse, but what would have happened if this had spread across the entire planet? This ark was meant to survive the destruction of the world. The method may have been extreme, but my stepmom's fears may not have been entirely unfounded.

I had to change how I looked at this.

The Calamity had spread through the enclosed environment of Absolute Noah. My dad and the rest of my family were in here, but so were Anastasia and the Sylpheed. There was no time to spare. There was a risk that everyone had ended up "like that", so this ark containing thousands was no different from an insane island on which some gloomy ritual was held. Despite the thousands of people in this closed space, I had not seen any other people like you would at a large train station, but that meant they were all packed into a smaller area. If something caused a shift in that distribution, they could come pouring in here. Whether they meant harm or not, when shivering chickens huddled together for warmth, the ones in the center could be crushed to death.

"Mom, Ayumi, and Erika. I'll make up for what I did later, but I want to know the situation. Some people came here with me and I can't lose them here."

According to my panicked stepmom back in that hellish kitchen, Absolute Noah had split into a human side and an immortal side and the humans had grown hostile toward the Archenemies.

Since they were weaker individually, they had used their numbers to begin a witch hunt, so Erika had been playing the role of a violent Archenemy to deter them.

Did that mean the humans were in the majority?

And was Ayumi fighting with Erika as a part of the act, or had Ayumi been fooled by Erika's act?

It was my stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, who gave me the details.

“Currently, Absolute Noah has been split in two. The Archenemies like us are holed up in the central command while the humans are using the engine room as their base. Mutual trust has completely collapsed. It looks like a balance of power has settled in, but the humans fully control the power supply and they can neutralize all of the electronic locks with a total blackout. That means they can make an attack at any time. And in the absolute worst case, they can overload the engine and kill us all in a giant explosion.”

Central control?

Engine room?

...That made the place sound like an unbelievably large ship, submarine, airplane, or rocket, but I did not have time to ask about it now. Moving the ark would not give us a way of safely reaching my dad or Anastasia, so I didn't need that.

“Let's assume the worst. How large would this explosion be?”

“...Big enough to not just destroy Kukyou City, but to blow away the 5 closest prefectures and rip the Japanese Archipelago in two.”

What the hell!? Did this ark have a nuclear engine!? And we weren't talking about a midair explosion! Even if you set off a nuke deep below the dam, wouldn't the thick bedrock suppress the blast like during underground nuclear tests!?

I decided to set aside my own mistakes for the moment.

“...Mom, you really need to think about what you've done. You've gone way too far.”

“Yes, that's finally started to hit home. I'm doing some real soul searching...”

They must have never imagined the infectious madness would spread through the ark and hijack the engine room. The ark legend required the inside of the ark to be a sanctuary.

“Where is Anastasia?”

“Um, is she here?”

Amatsu Yurina's confusion told me what I had to do: locate Anastasia and the

Sylpheed.

“Next comes dad. You said you were bringing him here in the truck, but is he not with you?”

“I said the humans and Archenemies split apart, didn’t I?”

...I had a bad feeling about this.

This was even more complicated than I had imagined. Or should I think of it as a single ray of hopeful sunlight?

“Your father was caught in the initial confusion and ended up on the human side. We have not heard from him since. It wasn’t like he wanted to join them. It was more like being caught in a crowded train and unable to get off at your station... He also used to be a Bright Cross researcher, so they might be forcing him to do some kind of work in Absolute Noah’s engine room. ...I just hope he isn’t repeating the mistake of taking the Archenemies’ side without reading the room first.”

That gave me a second objective.

We needed to find a way to get my dad out of the deepest and most dangerous depths. And he had to be alive.

However.

His actions down there could prevent the giant explosion of the worst case scenario. He held the golden key that no one else could touch.

“...I don’t like it, but we just have to go for it. Maxwell!”

“Sure.”

“I don’t remember it, but I must have caused you some trouble. We’re really getting started now, so prepare the necessary processing space. Create a new simulation file and flag it as a top priority task.”

“What shall I name the file?”

I took a deep breath.

And I answered.

“How to pick a fight with the end of the world.”

We had to start with the basics.

“This is the relaxation gym. Simply put, it’s a large room for getting some exercise. That might sound silly, but it is a necessity for people to survive in a closed environment like Absolute Noah.”

Even the strictest prison would have an exercise room. So even the most violent of criminals would break if they did not have this.

“It would be best to picture Absolute Noah as a giant tower located at the bottom of the dam’s reservoir lake. It would be about 40 stories tall, I think. But unlike normal, Absolute Noah isn’t made to detach pieces during the ascent. As I said, the engine room provides such a massive amount of energy that there is no real weight limit for the payload.”

“That alone would make this truly extraordinary. The weight is a standard concern for both ships and airplanes. This completely defies the science of planes and ships.”

“Our technology has surpassed that of humans alone, Satori.”

It was true I had seen the Sylpheed who could break the sound barrier on her own, so it was possible Archenemies had some crazy ideas about flight tech.

“The blocks related to life support tend to be at the top and the blocks necessary for movement tend to be at the bottom. That means we are relatively near the top and the main airlock you entered through was on the very top level. Meanwhile, your father is in the engine room at the very bottom.”

“Hm.”

“Also, the middle levels contain everything else. Most notably, the storage facilities for the wild flora and fauna and the genetic samples for the people who were not chosen.”

“...So if we’re going to search the entire structure, we’ll need a safe way of moving up and down.”

“There are emergency stairs and a freight elevator. They weren’t given much

focus because normal gravitational calculations wouldn't really be necessary when Absolute Noah is running properly."

...Surely she wasn't going to say they would produce artificial gravity from the centrifugal force of spinning the entire cylindrical structure.

"Fuguu. What about the old standard of ducts?"

"They're full of toxin filters. Even if you forced your way through, I think you would only end up sliced to pieces by the giant fans."

"...Ayumi-chan, this is a huge vertical structure, so most of the ducts would be vertical as well," said Erika. "But if you want to fall to your death in that narrow gap, I won't stop you."

"F-fuguu..."

Ayumi was already deflated. While I hadn't said anything, I had been seriously considering the same thing, so I was in no position to laugh at her. I couldn't help but give my little sister a head pat as I spoke up.

"What about the computer that manages the internal security cameras and sensors?"

Those would be invaluable for locating Anastasia and the Sylpheed and we also wanted to avoid having the witch hunt humans know what we were doing. A few thousand people was more than 10 times the population of a normal school, so internal trouble was a distinct possibility. They would surely have some kind of self-defense organization that played the role of police or administrators. Expecting a society of equality and smiles inside this ark was being far too optimistic, so they would need a surveillance and control system.

But my stepmom had this to say:

"You can ignore the cameras and sensors. They are set up, but the central computer meant to process the data was never installed."

"?"

"Maxwell, Laplace, and Ghost Cat. The plan was to borrow all of the computers you had gathered, hook them up in parallel, and use them as the guardians of the law within Absolute Noah. All to support the simplest law

enforcement system after inviting you in as a bridge between the humans and Archenemies.”

“...You can’t just take other people’s possessions...”

So did that mean I would be hell’s Minster of Justice?

On walkthrough sites that provided information on the legends used in games, you would sometimes see a ranked list of medieval demons. The demons’ names were listed alongside titles like “executioner” or “chef”, but it was never clear what exactly those positions meant.

“Really, I was mostly using that so you had an excuse to bring those inorganic machines aboard Absolute Noah,” said my stepmom. “Maxwell was one thing, but Laplace and Ghost Cat were recent additions and it took some doing to work them into the plan. All of it proved unnecessary, though.”

She smiled bitterly at that.

“But is that all? There are no other large computers on Absolute Noah?”

“There are computers in each individual section, but they use a different format and can’t be used to analyze the security camera data.”

...So was this really a vehicle? Whether the arc was a rocket or a submarine, installing multiple computer formats on a single payload was generally a bad idea. That would increase the amount of maintenance tools and spare parts. To reduce the weight, the design would eliminate any competing functions to get rid of every last gram possible.

“So for better or for worse, no one can use the security cameras? No, wait.”

“Onii-chan?”

“Maxwell, wake up Laplace and Ghost Cat. Make a wireless connection and enter standby mode. I’ll be sending you security data from Absolute Noah, so analyze it using all three machines. Then we alone should be able to use the security system! Oh, I’m so glad we have Laplace and Ghost Cat!!”

“...”

“Hey...? Please stop using those dots to express your jealousy!!”

“That was entirely your own fault, Onii-chan. Fuguu.”

Whatever the case, data was our greatest weapon. Knowing the distribution of people throughout the structure would give us a great advantage. It was as unfair as playing hide-and-seek while the person who was “it” watched everything from an airborne drone.

“If the human side doesn’t have the whole picture, they’ll have people posted at the crucial junctures to monitor and control the flow of people with minimal personnel costs. They’re sure to have checkpoints set up at the stairs or elevator. If there isn’t a secret way around, we’ll have to break through there.”

Unlike before, Ayumi, Erika, and my stepmom were all Archenemies who specialized in combat. They might be in trouble if a large group rushed into the limited space, but they would be quite reliable when it came to defeating a few people separated from the group.

“That also means you could create an opportunity by sowing the seeds of doubt by hinting at the existence of a secret route not present in the designs,” said Maxwell. “Shake them well enough and the checkpoint guards may temporarily move elsewhere.”

“Could we make noise and vibrations in the walls?”

“To use the ducts you mentioned before, simply blowing hot air into the chilled stainless steel ducts would cause a denting sound.”

“Oh, like when you pour the hot water from your cup yakisoba into the sink. That might indeed trick them into thinking someone is crawling through the duct.”

It would be effective if it worked, but it was not exactly repeatable. We had to see it as just one option available to us.

“Satori-kun, you’ve been eating that kind of junk alone at night? You’re not immortal like us, so you need to take care of your health.”

“We can discuss that later, Erika.”

“That’s right. Fuguu, you should’ve shared it with me!”

“That was not my point, little sister. Now, mom, about the security cameras.

You said the computer itself wasn't installed, but the internal wiring is all in place, right?"

"I believe so. The law enforcement system should be ready to activate as soon as Maxwell and the others are installed."

"...Then let's start with that. Where were the computers going to be installed? Let's construct a relay system that gathers all the data from the cables and sends it outside."

We needed to know where exactly Anastasia and my dad were if we were to rescue them. The best way to do that was to have Maxwell and the others process the data from all the cameras and sensors.

Luckily, I knew from the communication tower incident that the communications did work. Plus, the card-sized car navigation system was still linked back to the container at the harbor. I didn't have to worry whether or not there was a way to get the data out.

My stepmom naturally knew the most about Absolute Noah's internal structure, so she led us to our destination.

"Mom...how did the three of you avoid the Calamity's effects?"

"We don't really know. I'm not confident it isn't infecting me as we speak." She sighed and seemed to be smiling bitterly as she walked out ahead. "I think it's like motion sickness. It's somewhat influenced by your inherent traits and by your condition on that specific day...but there is no real way of choosing whether or not you will be affected. Everyone there is being constantly shaken by the motion and it isn't something you can suppress through your own effort once the signs show themselves. If only there was a way to just vomit it out until you had left the winding mountain road."

Your inherent traits and your condition...

That may have only been a metaphor, but it was true I had not gotten much rest while fighting with the supernatural hackers and Wild@Hunt. I was mostly masking my exhaustion with the energy drink Anastasia had given me.

I had "vomited" once.

And it could always happen again.

I could not afford to forget that. I was in an unstable condition that normally would have warranted locking me behind bars to keep me away from everyone else.

“ ... ”

We arrived at our destination without seeing anyone else along the way. I wasn't sure if that should make me happy or scared.

“This is the place.”

My stepmom opened an airtight metal door with a round handle to reveal a large chilly room.

A few LCD maintenance monitors and keyboards were installed near the wall and a few dozen fiber optic cables lay on the floor, but none of them were hooked up to anything.

“Then let's get started. Simply relaying the data shouldn't be too difficult.”

If we had to carefully assign the proper destination to each piece of data on the giant spider web of the internet, we would probably need a largescale server machine, but we just needed the one pipeline, the burden on the relay machine was greatly reduced.

These days, the smartphone social games everyone played might be hooked up to a giant server system that filled up an entire building. It used a lot of data overall, but the relay antenna bases located in cafes or subway stations were small enough to hold in your hands.

“Have you found a suitable computer?” asked Maxwell.

“Let's borrow this thermo controller in charge of the giant cold storage room's temperature control. It isn't needed without a computer to cool.”

I removed a likely wall panel and stuck a bundle of fiber optic cables into the exposed machinery.

Supercomputers were sometimes stored in rooms larger than a gym, but you could not just cool the entire room. If you did not use sensors to locate the heated sections and provide cooling there, the machines nearest the vents

could freeze over. Well, modern air conditioners could check the state of a room and the location of people before sending in the air, so just think of it like an even more incredible version of that.

This of course required a fair amount of data processing, so it could play the role of a small server.

“Copying necessary settings files...done. The thermo controller has been remade into a data relay system. Taking control of Absolute Noah 00’s security devices and beginning data processing.”

This was not so much hacking as it was hooking Maxwell and the others up to the machines they were originally intended for. There was no reason why it wouldn’t work.

“This card-sized car navigation system is a pain. Maxwell, use all the maintenance monitors on the wall.”

“Sure.”

Now, what fate awaited us here?

Life was breathed into the monitors and information on Absolute Noah spread out before our eyes.

“Uuh...!!!???”

Vivid red and black.

The silver corridors were packed full of crowds endlessly producing explosions of self-made anger and fear.

Each of them had the light of madness in their eyes and the canine teeth visible from their opened lips were even more frightening than those of a Zombie or Vampire.

“Are all of them human...?”

I had to question it.

My stepmom and sisters all looked more or less human, so it would be hard to tell if an Archenemy was mixed in. But at the very least, I saw no one with wings on their back or the lower half of a snake.

The humans were either forming barricades or taking their anger out on the machines because there were walls of abandoned objects blocking the way all over. But was there any logic to it? They were all industrial workstations larger than a refrigerator. Whatever their specs, with discretionary pricing they would probably cost far more than Maxwell. Seeing a super hacker's machines piled up like that felt like watching a bunch of crazed wannabe philosophers holding a sacrificial festival while rejoicing in their destruction of civilization.

Simply seeing it felt like a form of torture. The visual provided enough pressure to make the human mind give up on the world.

It was like negative scriptures.

I gulped and stared at the hellish scene on the screen. Data was our weapon here, so I could not save Anastasia or my dad if I looked away.

“Actually, what is this? What are they doing?”

The colors red and black were dancing in disarray on multiple screens. At first, I thought some Archenemies had been surrounded and were being gruesomely executed, but that did not seem to be the case.

“Are those hunks of beef they have hanging up there...?”

Ayumi was right.

Pieces of frozen red meat as tall as I was had presumably been dragged out of the food storage. After hanging the dead meat from the ceiling using thick ropes, the angry mob was shouting dirty words at them and beating them with metal pipes and poles they had torn from their surroundings. A translucent red liquid flowed from the partially-dissolved meat and the raw-smelling liquid splattered all over them like the blood of an enemy.

...Were they really this far gone...?

Ayumi and I tilted our heads at this strange “ritual”, but Erika and our stepmom groaned.

“Is that an exorcism...?”

“Fuguu?”

“In the West, they believed formless demons could possess things other than

humans. Because there are cases where livestock like bulls or pigs will gore or bite a human child to death.”

“They might be trying to drive a demon out of an animal like that, but that seems unlikely. The Western churches have judged and executed animals, but I have never heard of them purifying one back to normal. Of course, that might be why they keep doing this over and over.”

...Did that mean they were so ruled by fear that they could not eat a simple meat and vegetable dish without doing this?

There was a red substance splattered on the walls and floor elsewhere too. No, it was most noticeable on the doors. The thick metal doors with a round handle in the middle were covered in red.

Was that animal blood?

It was like seeing a trade fair for the kinds of sinister writing and patterns seen in RPGs.

Come to think of it, I had seen something similar on the walls of the abandoned hospital basement holding my biological mother, Magatsu Taori.

“Are those talismans, Erika?”

“...Yes, but it’s more like something from the Salem Witch Trials.”

Did that mean they wouldn’t actually work?

That was no reason to relax though. That crazed mob had become completely detached from reality as they relied on something nonexistent. I didn’t want to imagine what would happen if they were told the only way to slay the monster was a knife wet with the blood of a virgin’s heart.

The calming actions taken to distance oneself from madness could sometimes look like mad themselves.

If all that meant was attaching a magical talisman to your room’s wall, that was your business. But what if one was not enough for you and you covered every centimeter of the walls? Then it became hard to say whether that was fighting the madness or creating its own madness.

...I couldn’t leave an Archenemy out there. These people truly believed they

were safer if they hung dead meat from the ceiling and beat it up. These actions came from the same mindset that led someone to double-check the gas before they went out. So how far would this explode if they saw one of the Archenemies at the source of their fear?

“Things look different here. It’s like spying on a wake... Are these the Archenemies?”

Most areas were boiling over with anger and fear, but there were some small rooms that were cut off from that. A few men and women sat silently behind thick metal doors with their arms around their knees and their backs against the walls. They looked like children shutting their eyes to the cruel reality and waiting for the storm to pass.

“Mom, what is the population ratio of Absolute Noah? Between humans and Archenemies, I mean.”

“About 8-to-2 in the humans’ favor.”

“Since there are a few thousand in all, that means there are fewer than 1000 Archenemies...”

The ratio may have been modeled after that of Earth’s population.

If they had wanted to, they could have put together an organization of just humans or just Archenemies. Neither species would die out if they stored the DNA. Archenemies were superior on the individual level, so if they were in the minority, it meant they had given up most of the seats. They had swallowed their fear of death and extinction, they had trusted in the plan, and they had been fair. And this was how they were rewarded? I doubted the humans were going to give any thought to how they had gotten their seats on the ark.

...And while a concentrated attack had yet to begin, those thick airtight doors would eventually be broken through once the mob realized who was behind them.

“Now we know the overall situation. Basically, Absolute Noah has been transformed into an inescapable island of freaks where the witch hunt continues in the modern age. And there are possible victims awaiting rescue in places. Maxwell, let’s collect as many of them as possible. Figure out what all

you can control with your security privileges: doors, shutters, the fire system, the air conditioning, and so on.”

“Sure.”

“But Anastasia, the Sylpheed, and dad take top priority. Let’s bring the scattered Archenemies back together to create a single large base.”

“Should I begin with the orthodox method?”

“Yes. Use the security camera records to track my dad and the others via facial recognition.”

Part of me wanted to see the result, but part of me did not. Even though I was the one who had given the command.

It only took a few seconds to find the answer.

New footage taken from the corner of the ceiling was displayed on the monitors lining the wall.

“Anastasia!”

“No. The security cameras do not have speakers.”

A finger-sized fairy hovered near the small blonde girl’s face. Good, the Sylpheed was with her. Good!

I had dragged them here. And I had abandoned them in the confusion. I had brought that small girl to this inescapable hell. I couldn’t allow any more mistakes. I had to safely regroup with her no matter what it took.

“Shall I contact her portable game system?” asked Maxwell.

“Yes...no, wait.”

I just about agreed, but then I hesitated.

I had forgotten because of how shaken I was by events, but why hadn’t Anastasia contacted us? Because she didn’t know my address now that I had exchanged my smartphone for a car navigation system? No, Anastasia might not know Maxwell’s location in the harbor container yard, but she had made direct cyber-attacks for fun. There was no way she could not contact us.

In that case...

“I’m guessing Anastasia is afraid of connecting to the internet via Absolute Noah’s internal system. She might not want her location being traced from the connection.”

The details were more complicated, but Maxwell, Laplace, and Ghost Cat were meant to be used as Absolute Noah’s official system. That meant it could not be hacked or cyber-attacked. Meanwhile, Anastasia would be afraid of triggering an alert if she simply sent out a signal inside here.

Which meant...

“First, check the surrounding environment. Let’s find out if there is an actual risk in contacting Anastasia. And if there is a risk, we need to eliminate it and construct a safe line for contacting her.”

“Sure.”

I was entirely reliant on Maxwell for the data processing. Meanwhile, we stared at the screens to check on small Anastasia’s situation in a physical sense.

My stepmom, Amatsu Yurina, placed a hand on her slender chin and spoke.

“That looks like the mid-level genetic storage area. There are so many identical facilities in there that I couldn’t tell you the exact sector or number, though.”

“And?”

“Those are freezer facilities, so she can’t stay there long.”

I looked again and noticed Anastasia was not leaning against the wall or sitting on the floor. She was standing in the middle of the room and wrapping her arms around her shoulders like she was cold. Her breath was white too.

...Was she afraid of her bare skin sticking to the floor or wall because of how little her clothing covered?

“She’s closed up in there? What are things like outside?”

“Fuguu!? It looks pretty bad, Onii-chan! Look at this!!”

Ayumi was right.

The corridor beyond the metal door was full of the “witch hunt” humans. It

was like a packed train or a TV report on a shrine on New Year's. I didn't know how strong that metal door was, but it was being dented by metal pipes and crowbars pounding on it from the outside. There were too many people outside for them to make full swings, but that was not very reassuring.

"...Will the door...hold up?"

"Acquiring airtight door spec sheet," said Maxwell. "It would do damage to the humans in the corridor as well, but if more than 150 of them pushed at once, they could destroy it."

"You're kidding...!"

"The door has only survived this long because Miss Anastasia sprayed water on the door and let it freeze."

"But wait. Satori, look."

My stepmom pointed at a change from before.

The densely-packed wall of people was being forcibly parted. Something was scaring that pack of excited wolves enough for them to move away and whatever-it-was was approaching the metal door guarding Anastasia.

It was...

"What are they carrying on their back? A burner!?"

"No, that is probably an arc welder that uses an electric arc."

"Weld...er?"

Those incredible things that joined metal together instead of cutting it apart?

At first, I thought they were using heat to melt the ice through the door, but that was not it.

"This is bad, Satori. They're trying to weld the door shut so Anastasia-chan can't get out!"

"...!?"

Breaking down the door was not the only problem.

If Anastasia could not leave that below-freezing room, her life would still be at

risk!

I could hear the voices from the corridor:

“Outta the way, outta the way! Stand back if you don’t want to be blinded!!”

“What? We’re sealing it off now!?”

“Not touching the dirty infection source is best. Just get it over with!!”

...To hell with them.

What had Anastasia done? And unlike my Vampire older sister and Zombie little sister, a maid fairy like a Silky had no obvious form of infection.

Had I been like this too?

Had I been this hideous when I pushed my older sister’s body onto the countertop and raised the butcher’s knife!?

“Maxwell, search Anastasia’s surroundings! Is there anything we can do from here!?”

“We could lower the shutters to split up the humans, but that is unlikely to stop the man performing the welding in front of the door. We could also gather all the Archenemies hiding nearby, but it is unknown if they would work to rescue Anastasia.”

“Kh! What about that arc welder on the bastard’s back!? Just blow it up!”

“It is not an IoT device. It is a primitive device that cannot be controlled via the internet.”

“Dammit!!”

...What would we do?

There were more than 150 men and women with bloodshot eyes. Even if I ran there myself, what could I do? My Vampire older sister and Zombie little sister had more than 10 times the strength of a normal person, but that meant they could be crushed by a group of more than 100.

“Y’here that!” shouted someone on the screen. “It’s too late to cry and scream now!! It’s time you froze solid in that freezer! Got that!?”

“I doubt she can hear you.”

“And that means her voice can’t reach anyone either. Die! Die cold and alone!!”

“...Goddammit...!!” I cursed.

What I hated most of all was myself for just sitting here based on my risk assessment.

I couldn’t do it.

I couldn’t do anything!!

Why was I so powerless? I couldn’t face this mistake head on, plow through them all, and rescue my friend! It was my fault! I let the confusion of the Calamity affect me and I abandoned those two! So why? Why was I nothing more than a puny human!!!???

“Uuuh.

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhh!!”

I clenched my teeth and just barely held back the tears. I couldn’t give up. I had to keep observing. I did not have a legendary sword and I didn’t have a saint’s blood in my veins. I was nothing more than a technician who worked behind the scenes. So I couldn’t run away from a geek’s weapons. I couldn’t let go of my greatest weapon: data!!

“...Huh?”

Just then, something seemed to stand out on that screen of despair and madness. Yes, I had noticed something familiar mixed in. Just one person in that mob of crazed humans was calmly observing the hell that had appeared there.

It was the kind of middle-aged man who could blend into the background anywhere. He had unhealthy-looking skin, stubble on his chin, a twisted dress shirt, and slacks.

He glanced up at the security camera on the ceiling, as if he had noticed us observing them.

I gasped.

Yes, I knew who that was.

“Dad!?”

His gaze was that of a rational person. And he had the look of someone who had decided to face a mistake.

He did not speak.

But his lips were clearly moving.

He risked his life to send a silent message without those around him noticing.

“Maxwell, analyze that footage and convert it into words!”

“Sure.”

I wasn’t alone. I had my family with me. My stepmom, Erika, and Ayumi were all focused on the screen.

And the words appeared like a movie’s subtitles.

Is that you, Satori?

...He had noticed. He really had noticed!?

“He’s focused on the turning of the camera. He knows only Maxwell and the others would be confirmed as a proper security server, so did that make him think of me!?”

My dad glanced over at the metal door and the chaos there, but then he stared at the security camera again.

That Archenemy was not registered. Is she a friend of yours?

I wanted to respond to him in some way, so I had the security camera shake up and down. Like it was a nodding head.

On the screen, my dad seemed to exhale.

I will take care of the people in front of the door. That will create an opening, so you get her to safety in that time.

“What...?”

Dark and heavy unease rose in my chest.

What was my dad planning on doing? There were so many fully-grown adults there! Even a Vampire or Zombie would likely be killed if they attempted it head on!!

Meanwhile, he kept his eyes on the camera and moved his lips.

Are you ready?

I could not respond.

Are you ready to act?

But what could I do but nod?

What option did I have but to move the camera up and down to say yes!?

Good.

He narrowed his eyes a little.

He seemed to be smiling.

Sorry.

How?

How could he be so resolute? I had hesitated. So had our Archenemy family members. But my dad alone was different. Even though Anastasia was a complete stranger to him.

And yet he had definitely said it.

This was something I should be doing and it was something I had been too afraid to do, but he had done it so readily.

But I can't just ignore this.

It happened in an instant.

Truly just an instant.

“Ahh!?”

My stepmom and his wife held her hands to her mouth and cried out.

While inside that mob packed as closely as a rush-hour train, my dad poured his full body weight into a tackle.

He moved toward the distant metal door.

Maxwell had said this could break that thick door if the conditions were right. But my dad was intentionally starting a domino effect in order to stop the welder idiot in front of the door.

Just how dangerous an act was that?

The Japanese constitution was powerless here. If it was found out he had done this intentionally, he would be exposed to the same vigilante justice that was threatening the Archenemies.

“...Kh...”

I clenched my teeth but still managed to shout from between my teeth.

“Sure. I will divide the people with the shutters. While distancing the rioters as much as possible with those barriers, I will connect the closest Archenemies to Miss Anastasia’s door.”

Could I really trust in that?

I wiped the tears from my eyes and turned around. I grabbed some zip ties meant to organize cables. I knew exactly where to go. My dad had given us this chance to rescue them and I wasn't going to let it go to waste just because no one else chose to help!!

“Satori-kun!”

“Fuguu!! C’mon, mom, you come too!!”

Yes, that was right. I wasn't alone. No one could stay silent after seeing that.

“That fool...” groaned Amatsu Yurina. “He’s always like this. When he was with the Bright Cross, he did nothing but think about the Archenemies, lost his place there, and broke his family apart. Why does he never even consider stopping...!?”

“...That would be because he’s our dad.”

He was not particularly strong, he could not use any kind of supernatural power, and he could not spread an infection

But he had stood up to them.

He had shown true strength by challenging that hopeless mistake while powerless.

I couldn't lose him.

Not him, not Anastasia, and not the Sylpheed! I wouldn't let anything damage their honor even a little bit!!

Face forward.

Work with what he gave you.

Who was I? I was his only son!! So find what you inherited from him and show that same resolve!!!!!!

"Descend the stairs to reach the mid-level area," said Maxwell. "I will construct a suitable route by opening and closing shutters, but do not forget that the rioters are wandering around here. Be prepared for spontaneous battles."

I was well aware of that.

I was sick of clenching my teeth and not fighting. I wasn't patient enough for that. I grabbed a fire extinguisher from a corner of the corridor and ran down the stairs with my family.

Fight.

Break through!

Secure this path toward everyone's survival!!

Down the stairs, we found a section full of similarly-structured rooms. It was a seemingly endless series of intersections laid out in a grid. All of the shutters were closed to separate the rioters, but...

"I will open the shutters for a route on which you will encounter the minimum number of people. That said, the number is not zero. You will run into some trapped rioters."

"Understood, Maxwell."

A shutter rose with a heavy metallic noise and around 10 young men and

women awaited us in a small space.

I might have hesitated earlier. I might have rationally said we should find a way around and avoid a fight.

But I was not going to hesitate any longer.

I held the fire extinguisher in both hands.

“Outta the way... Outta the
waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

This may have been a complete disaster for them.

With 100 or 1000 people gathered in a small space, they could push back even an Archenemy, but once they were divided up by the thick shutters, they only had around 10 people. And while I was a complete amateur, Erika and Ayumi would be unstoppable as long as they had enough space to move around.

After all, they were 10 or 20 times stronger than a normal person.

And the rioters would not have a chance to recover. We would not give them one. We would open one shutter at a time to gradually wear down their numbers without letting them regroup. Their damages would only grow.

“No, this is some kind of mistake. No!!”

"I'm a victim. I'm just a victim!"

“Why does everything have to happen to us...?”

This was the result when you robbed a mob of their greatest weapon: anonymity. The more I heard, the more the blood rushed to my head and the more I beat them down and bound their hands behind their backs with the zip ties. I had seen exactly what they had done. Trying to fix it with words felt profane.

“Pant, pant! Dammit, Maxwell!! How many more shutters before we reach Anastasia!? Dammit!!”

“Only three more.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

I gathered strength in my trembling arms once more and charged through the next boxy ring with the fire extinguisher raised. Was this the conscience of humankind? Were these humans full of the kindness worthy of their position here? Like hell they were. They were no different. In fact, they were even uglier. They were delighted at being chosen, just like the deus ex machina endings of Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling. Don't abandon your family for that! How am I supposed to respect people like this!? Stay down! Don't get back up! Stay knocked down forever!!

"This is the last one. I will now open the final shutter before Genetic Cold Storage Room C9 where Anastasia awaits."

With a low rumble, the metal shutter opened straight up.

A large man stood in front of the door with a flamethrower-like device on his back. It must have been hit by the brunt of the pressure from the domino effect my dad had started. Something like a compressed gas cylinder was badly bent and a sound of escaping air came from a socket-like part.

"...You...monster..."

He faced me with awkward movements.

"You...this...arc...monster...do you have any idea who-..."

"I don't give a shit who you are!!"

The metal spear attached with a hose was aimed toward me, so I raised the fire extinguisher in both hands and threw it like a soccer ball.

The large man immediately swung the arc welder's electrode around to knock it down, but that move was a big mistake.

The fire extinguisher was a highly compressed container. Damage it and it would explode.

The fire extinguishing foam was colored more pink than white and it scattered in every direction along with the metal shards of the ruptured container.

"...Leave my life and never come back, you garbage."

I approached the collapsed and unmoving man, lightly kicked his head, and then removed the equipment from his back. Lastly, I bound his hands behind his

back with a zip tie.

“Anastasia!”

I pounded on the bent airtight door and shouted, but there was no response.

Was it not made so she could hear me, or was she too cautious of any action from outside?

“Who has control of the door? Can’t you open it, Maxwell?”

“I have already unlocked the electronic lock via the software, but the door has physically frozen and will not open.”

That was fine.

I put the man’s welder on my back.

“Maxwell, download the specifications document and user’s manual from the maker’s site. I’ll use this to heat the door and melt the ice on the other side.”

“The electronic lock is already open and the deadbolt has opened, but try not to hit any of the door’s moving parts.”

I followed Maxwell’s instructions to set it to low power, press the light at the end of the rod against the door, and heat up the thick metal.

It was already unlocked. It must have opened a bit and broken the airtight seal because clear water eventually seeped out along the floor.

“Is that enough?”

“Yes, but the door should be extremely hot.”

My jacket...wouldn’t be enough. Its synthetic fabric would melt. I removed my belt, passed it through the round handle in the center of the metal door, and pulled straight down to turn it.

A dull sound rang out.

And this time...!!

“I’m opening the door, Anastasia!!”

I pulled the heavy door toward me with all my might and shouted at the top of my lungs. A white mist approached at my feet. More than just cold, it stung

my skin. Were Anastasia and the Sylpheed all right!?

“...Uuh...”

Just a bit ago, the security camera had shown her standing in the middle of the room to avoid touching the walls or floor.

But now she was curled up on the floor.

No, did she not have enough strength to stand up!?

“Dammit!”

“No. Picking her up risks tearing off the skin where it has frozen to the floor.”

“Is there anything we can burn!?”

“Even if it is an industrial cooler, the basic structure is no different from an air conditioner or refrigerator.”

“Let’s remove the filter!”

I pulled out something like a fine window screen that was long widthwise. They could have used a synthetic material, but they had apparently gone with luxurious silk thread. I pressed the arc welder’s rod against it and it burst into flames.

With that torch in hand, I only had to move it close to Anastasia’s skin to melt the parts frozen to the floor.

“Slowly. I need to do this slowly.”

“I have predicted the heat distribution based on the room temperature and floor material. Please use this as a guide.”

She ended up almost completely soaked, but I was finally able to lift Anastasia up.

“...Sorry.”

I could not help but bite my lip.

Even though apologizing was meaningless when she could not hear me and had not blamed me for anything.

“I’m sorry, Anastasia...!!”

I escaped the genetic cold storage room with the Sylpheed flying weakly alongside me.

“Dammit. That leaves dad. Maxwell, are you tracking him?”

There was no response.

“Maxwell!?”

“No. I am continuing to track his location using facial recognition. However...”

“?”

My stepmom and sisters gathered around the card-sized car navigation system as well.

“Starting from the outer areas of the mid-level section, they have begun prying up the shutters with tools. He seems to have met up with those people.”

“Fuguu? You mean we’re back to square one!? What will happen to dad!?”

“No. It appears he intentionally regrouped with them and is leaving this place with them. It does not appear he is being taken into custody as the culprit behind the domino effect.”

“...His battle isn’t over yet,” said my stepmom who had seen my dad from a different angle. “As a technician on the human side, he has access to the engine room at the bottom level. He plans to use that position to prevent a chain-reaction explosion.”

...If so, it was far too dangerous.

They had not noticed he had caused the domino effect that saved Anastasia, but those who had been knocked over had not died. One of the injured people could accuse him after being retrieved and treated. They could say he was the one who had pushed them. ...In fact, it didn’t even matter if it was true. Whether it was a lie or fake news, whoever shouted an accusation first would win.

He had to have known the risks.

So why had he bought this time for us?

The answer was obvious. I had seen what he had said through the camera

lens:

But I can't just ignore this.

"...Dammit!!"

Complaining was not going to help.

I was sick of having my family split apart. I had to save my dad from that den of madness and violence.

What steps did I need to accomplish that?

Maxwell guided me to the answer.

"The previously hidden Archenemies have begun to appear in the corridors. They may have relaxed now that there is no sign of the rioters."

"...That's right."

What we lacked were numbers and a safe zone.

If we could rearrange the Archenemies into a single organization, they might have the strength needed to push back the human rioters who had numbers on their side.

"At the very least, we need them to protect Anastasia and the Sylpheed while they're weak. Can you manage that, mom?"

"Eh? Yes. You're right..."

I couldn't really blame her for the half-hearted response. Behaving like normal in this situation simply wasn't possible.

I had Maxwell open a few shutters so we could meet up with the hidden Archenemies.

"Wah!?"

"Who are you...? I see a human with you..."

"Madam Lilith. So you were safe."

Some of them looked no different from humans, but there was also a girl whose lower half was that of a giant horse. And among them, one girl spoke to my stepmom instead of me.

“It was a small black-haired girl in a work jumpsuit with a loudspeaker hanging from her shoulder.

“The girl from Las Vegas’s Hoover Dam...?”

“I am Nese Orlando, aka Archenemy Banshee. It is a pleasure to see you again, Son of Lilith.”

There was a lot I wanted to say, but securing our safety came first. This would all be for naught if we were stabbed in the side in the middle of recovering and it all collapsed.

We had already learned that the metal shutters could be pried open with special tools, so we could not rely on them forever.

“Maxwell, search the security cameras for the largest Archenemy shelter and any isolated Archenemies we can pick up on the way there.”

“Sure.”

“And don’t lose track of my dad’s position.”

He was probably prioritizing the prevention of an explosion from Absolute Noah going berserk over his own safety. That was the kind of person he was.

So we would save his life. We could not afford to fail here. We had to bring this through to the end.

“For the time being, the humans should be focused on digging out and saving the humans who have been separated and isolated by the shutters,” explained Maxwell. “You should return to the mostly Archenemy-held area on the upper levels while they do so.”

“Yeah...”

We could not use the same method twice.

It would grow even more difficult to pass through the mid-level area and enter the lower levels which were controlled by the humans.

We climbed the stairs and knocked violently on some of the closed metal doors on the way. The people inside generally held their breath, but when the Banshee used her loudspeaker to call out to them with ultrasonic waves that

humans could not produce, the Archenemies hesitantly poked their heads out.

“Wah! What’s that white fuzzball!? An abominable snowman?”

“I am not a man. I am a female Wendigo. So at least call me an abominable snow woman.”

“You’re okay with the abominable part...?”

As our numbers grew, so did the variations. It was starting to look something like the Hyakki Yakou or Halloween. And the higher we climbed, the less on edge everything felt.

...Was I actually more comfortable with them than with the humans?

“Turn right at the next corner,” said Maxwell. “The largescale laundry has become an Archenemy base.”

“Laundry? Like a coin laundry?”

“When besieged, the most important necessity is food, but if you do not account for the others, you will end up creating a hotbed for infectious disease. This is a crucial facility.”

Well, just like even the strictest prison would have an exercise yard and a cafeteria, they would also need a linen room full of washing machines.

I followed Maxwell’s instructions and guided everyone inside.

As soon as we turned the corner, a certain scene came into view.

“Line up facing the wall!! Put your hands in the air and line up, human scum!!”

“Just kill them!! We can protect ourselves on our own!!”

...Dammit.

Had they lost control here too!?

At the end of a straight corridor with a door presumably to the coin laundry on the right, some men and woman with battered and swollen faces had their hands raised. There were about 10 of them. And it was obvious why they did not turn their backs and face the wall as instructed.

...Once the preparations were complete, the actual executions would begin. So they could not afford to complete that first step.

And what were those people that were beating them? They looked human enough, but their arms were covered with fur as hard as wires.

My Vampire older sister groaned.

“...Werewolves. They’re supposedly powerful enough to get confused with us.”

I did not know the details, but it would be best to assume these people could tear out a human’s flesh and blood with a swing of the arm, just like a tiger or bear.

They seemed to be the “soldiers” while the onlookers stuck their heads out from the laundry door to the side. They did not want to be treated like those soldiers, but they also wanted to watch.

...It was also wrong to view Archenemies too positively. They were exactly the same as humans.

But I still felt faint when I saw a small children looking out from the cracked-open door.

“What are you doing!?”

When I shouted at them and approached, the Werewolves turned toward me. They clenched and unclenched their hands to produce a solid clacking of their claws. Hearing that, Erika and Ayumi gave off a murderous pressure as Archenemies.

This was a touchy situation.

The battered humans looked back and forth between the two sides – including me – with looks of disbelief. They seemed to be asking whose side we were on.

I wanted to tell them I wasn’t on their side.

“Who the hell are you!?” roared on of the Werewolves. “I haven’t heard anything about a mixed unit!”

“ ... ”

“You feel sorry for them, human? They only look like frightened bunnies because they’ve lost the violence of numbers. The second they get back with the other humans, they’ll be right back to being an anonymous part of the group thanks to that group psychology! If we don’t reduce their numbers here and chop down the trees of that human forest, they’ll just keep throwing stones at us!!”

“So it’s justified to kill them before they kill you? Do that and you’re no different from the humans and their preemptive witch hunt!!”

“Human scum!! Do you think you alone have some special right to an impartial view!?”

“Yeah, I’m a human! So what!? Are you some amazing Archenemy who could choose what he was born as!?”

Nothing I had said was wrong.

They may have thought they were the winners now that they had turned the tables on the humans who had made them suffer, but that was no different from the bullied kid become a bully. What did that get you? Could you really hold your head high and say you had conquered that unreasonable pain? They had just become a slave to the bonds known as bullying.

One side had gone berserk and the other side was being dragged down with them. This wasn’t justice. All I could see were people drowning in madness!

I had thought everyone would see this the same way.

But a stir ran through the Archenemies behind me, rather than the Werewolves in front of me.

“But it was the violent humans that started this...”

“If we can’t leave here, we need to defend ourselves.”

“We’re supposed to fight our fellow Archenemies now? Why? What for?”

“...Wait...”

The voices were coming from behind me. From the Archenemies we had

rescued.

I could not turn around.

I was afraid of turning around and confirming what I had heard.

This was not an argument between two incompatible groups. Both sides were Archenemies. Was that what was happening? Their sympathy only resonated with other immortals, so a human like me was trapped between them!?

“Warning!!” said Maxwell.

I was surrounded by noise. With me in the center holding Anastasia, my stepmom, Erika, and Ayumi were singled out along with me.

What about the Sylpheed?

Or the Banshee girl?

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

No good. They were watching to see what happened. They might be waiting for the right time to strike like with my dad hiding in the human group, but I doubted that would come to fruition.

I had to save my isolated dad, so I couldn't have that possibility cut off here!!

“Wait! The others are Archenemies. So is Anastasia I'm holding here!! Can't you at least take them in!?”

“Onii-chan...!?”

“What are you saying, Satori-kun!?”

...I would keep as many of them alive as possible so they could save my dad. That was all I could do. There was nothing else to bet on!

But one of the Werewolves spat out a response.

“Human sympathizers would only throw us off balance. We can't accept them. Besides, I hear Archenemy Lilith has taken a human husband. She might as well be human herself.”

“ ...!! ”

Did this guy want me to kill him!?

Meanwhile, Amatsu Yurina silently narrowed her eyes.

“I see. So that’s what this is about.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“The accident itself was coincidental, but you decided to use it. You wanted to drag me down from the leadership, give up on coexisting with humans, and only allow the immortals to survive the Calamity.”

...Oh.

My stepmom, Archenemy Lilith, was one of Absolute Noah’s leaders. Before even thinking about persuading these people, she should have been able to just order them around.

But she could not.

The humans and Archenemies had gone berserk and someone who could give them orders was trying to force my stepmom out of their minds.

A rogue unit had destroyed the chain of command.

...That explained why they had no interest in listening to me. These incarnations of violence would not listen to Lilith at the top, so of course the peaceful argument of an outsider wasn’t going to reach them!

“Why did the humans secure the lower levels so quickly!?” asked my stepmom. “Was it because you took over the top levels, guiding them down there!?”

“...”

“But I don’t understand. You can turn the humans into villains by having them blow up the engine room. But that will blow away Absolute Noah as a whole. Then you can’t take control and start oppressing the humans. You’ll be reduced to ashes along with them!”

Yes.

What was it they wanted to accomplish here?

Absolute Noah had boiled over because of the Calamity. But according to my

stepmom, the humans had taken over the lower levels and the incredibly dangerous engine room because they had been guided in that direction. If so, why? It was like asking the humans to deliver a finishing blow.

After thinking it through that far, a chill ran down my spine.

Wait.

It couldn't be.

It just couldn't. Even imagining that possibility felt like a terrible sin!!

"None of that matters."

It was a saccharine female voice.

This was not one of the Werewolves who had been out in the corridor. The laundry room's door had opened wide and someone slowly appeared from within while rubbing the heads of the Archenemy onlookers.

There was a somewhat decadent sense to it, but she had a bewitchingly beautiful woman's body. Her bright white skin seemed to reflect the light. Her long hair had the color of dried grass and it dangled down to hide her ample breasts, giving her an extremely defenseless look.

On the other hand, below the thin cloth wrapped around her waist, she had the slimy body of a large snake. Her hair and scales were like dried grass, but perhaps because her beautiful face was reminiscent of a sweet aroma, they looked more like milk tea. Also, her hair and scales glittered with rainbow colors that changed depending on the angle, like a disk's surface. The colorful light was like a charm that seeped out even as she tried to suppress it. Despite the dry grass decadence, she possessed an eternal beauty. She was undeniably an Archenemy. And she stood in a position that allowed her to speak on equal footing with Demon Lord Lilith.

My stepmom called her name.

"...Charlotte Fregula."

"That is only a temporary name. Please call me Archenemy Echidna."

That was a half-human, half-snake monster from Greek Mythology. She would stick just the top half of a beautiful woman out from her cave to lure in men

and then feast upon them once they were within the lethal range. She was also the womb of chaos who had mated with many inhuman monsters to give birth to Archenemies more powerful and violent than herself, such as the Cerberus and Hydra.

...Lilith was also said to have once given birth to all sorts of demons and evil spirits, like a downloader virus that spread its many evils around the world. In that sense, they were equals. They were uncelebrated mothers whose offspring became incarnations of ruin.

“Lady...Charlotte?”

The Sylpheed spoke up in apparent surprise. Come to think of it, she had mentioned a “Charlotte” a few times. But the Echidna with pure white skin and milk tea hair did not even glance at her faithful servant who had set foot in this deadly place for her.

My stepmother, Demon Lord Lilith, opened her mouth.

“What have you done?”

“This is nothing so simple. After all, I have little power on my own.”

The Echidna reached her slender white hand toward the corridor wall. I doubted it was because her snake lower body was unstable.

There was a sticky sound.

The wall looked as solid as stainless steel, but it throbbed like an internal organ.

This was not meaningless.

It was covered in scales that were the color of dried grass yet glittered with a rainbow light, just like the Echidna.

“An insulator.”

It looked like a giant soft bag...but that was not all.

There was more on the walls, floor, and ceiling.

Many things dripped down like a cascade of flesh covered in rainbow-glittering scales. Were they attached to the solid walls, or had the solid walls

been transformed into them?

They were either covered in dry grass scales or had broken through them while they throbbed to make their presence known.

One was like a screw made from a circular collection of giant bird feathers, one was a distorted ball made from bat heads, one was a flesh tube that wriggled on the floor like an umbilical cord...

“A centrifuge, an ultrasound machine, and an ultra-precise dropper. The oxygen and nutrients are over here. I can also prepare a blade or saw if you like. Live births and egg births both work.”

Her horribly twisted surroundings made the beauty of the Echidna’s face and body stand out all the more.

“My children are powerful, but if they are too large, my belly cannot contain them. So I start by producing a womb capable of birthing my child. In modern terms, I suppose you could call this a biology lab. ...At this point, they are not yet alive. A soul only resides within them once they are born from here.”

I had a bad feeling about this.

No matter what she was thinking, would she really just reveal all this here? And I didn’t mean in front of enemies like us. I meant to the Werewolf soldiers and the onlookers. If she stood at the top of the pyramid, would she really reveal her true character in front of those she ruled? A king might have absolute power, but that would evaporate once they lost their charisma. If they lost their standing, a cruel fate awaited them.

Why was she not afraid of that?

And why had the Archenemies suddenly separated from us while none of them questioned that suicidal plan?

“But I can use this lab’s equipment to efficiently control their minds.”

Kh...

“Mom! Erika, Ayumi!?”

I shouted and backed away with Anastasia in my arms. I did not know anything specific, but this had truly eliminated the chance of everyone getting

along. An unknown infection source was coming from that laundry. It was all over if we went in there. No, not even this corridor was safe!!

Something like a mini-sandstorm burst from below the door. It was...

“Are you familiar with the Myrmecoleon? It is a cross between an ant and a lion. The monster has a lion’s head and forelegs, but an ant’s abdomen and hind legs. But the lion’s mouth can only consume meat and the ant’s belly cannot accept that thick meat. Thus, the twisted lifeform can never live for long.”

The Echidna licked her lips with an oddly long and skinny tongue.

“Such interesting traits. It just makes you want to test out all sorts of things, doesn’t it? And my lab has plenty of materials. Now, what would happen if I changed that crossbreeding? For example, what would happen if I crossbred a tiny blood-sucking tick with a fierce man-eating snake woman? Why, it would function as a small dropper or capsule, wouldn’t it?”

Was that what all of the specks making up this storm were!?

“I created the owners of the world’s smallest fangs at just 0.12mm. Yes, even without a soul, they can still use their fangs. It is difficult to remove a lethal amount of the target’s blood with those small bodies, but there is no restriction against spitting the blood back out. Thus, by clinging to the target’s blood vessels while continually sucking out blood and returning it to target’s bloodstream, you can technically ‘suck a lethal amount of blood’ without actually changing their total level of blood by a single drop. You can see them now because they are gathered in one place, but when they are spread out across a wider area, the naked eye cannot see them even when they are attached to your hair and clothing.”

“That’s not possible. There’s no Archenemy legend anywhere in the world with such a convenient infection source!!”

“Weren’t you listening? These are not Archenemies. They are equipment for my biology lab. They are tools used to deliver my children.”

The Echidna revealed another frightening side of herself. She was a monster who could secure whatever she wanted in order to produce whatever supernatural phenomenon she wanted. And she had released that microscopic

blood-sucking control medium modified from a Myrmecoleon. Maxwell had already said that a laundry room was an important facility since it kept things clean and prevented infectious disease. Had she taken advantage of that by scattering these landmines to every part of Absolute Noah by infecting the clothing and bedding provided in the building!?

The 0.12mm blood-sucking ticks were not the only part that felt like cheating. That woman could procure any number of weapons on that same level. She controlled everything related to the birth of the bizarre. How could you play chess or shogi when you didn't know about all of the pieces in advance? Not even relying on a supercomputer would save me! It was simply too dangerous!!

"Maxwell! Use your security privileges to access the fire equipment and activate the sprinklers!!"

"Sure."

"Oh, dear."

When the rain poured from the ceiling, the Echidna spoke quietly while shaking her hair that looked like dry grass or milk tea but glittered in rainbow colors depending on the angle. If they were too small to see, then each one could not have much strength. The drops of water would capture them.

And now that they had been knocked from the air and immobilized on the floor...!!

"Ayumi, Erika!!"

"Understood."

"Fuguu!!"

We did not have to think about defeating all of them. ...The humans by the wall were a shame, but the odds were good they had blood-sucking ticks in their hair and clothing. It was just like taking an injured person and placing them over a mine to lay a trap for anyone trying to rescue them.

I did not dare approach them while holding unconscious Anastasia in my arms.

I turned back the way I had come.

The Wendigo, Centaur, and other Archenemies were waiting there, but my stepmom grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall and sprayed its foam around. The sprinkler was working against that attempt, but it still functioned as a smokescreen.

This was the optimal answer I had reached and accepted.

But...

“Please wait! Don’t leave us here!”

“No! They’ll kill us! I don’t want to be executed!”

“...!!”

“You can’t, Satori! The injuries to their face are proof enough that the tick-covered Werewolves have physically touched them, so the ticks are almost certainly on them as well!”

I knew that.

I knew that, but still!!

“Oh, so it didn’t work.”

I heard a mocking voice behind us as we fled.

“But a righteousness that always chooses the right answer looks plenty insane if you ask me.”

The only voice I heard belonged to the rainbow-decorated Echidna while her sweet milk tea hair covered her pure white chest.

In other words, the wailing survivors had suddenly stopped. Like a switch had been thrown.

So it really had been a trap.

The infected victims were only being made to act like humans.

“Dammit...!!”

We had to leave.

Absolute Noah had fallen even further into chaos.

The upper and lower levels were dangerous.

On the middle levels, the humans rioters trapped between shutters were still being rescued.

We finally had nowhere left to go.

We could not solidify our position enough to rescue my dad like this.

“Banshee, Sylpheed...!”

Losing them had hurt the most. If I had been a little more careful, the Archenemies following us might not have become victims!!

“...It might be too soon to despair,” said my older sister. “If those blood-sucking ticks really can indiscriminately spread damage without being seen, the Echidna herself could be affected while inside that laundry room she has transformed into her nest. In that case...”

“Are you saying there’s some way of resisting it, Erika?”

“Yes. The primary condition for a lab is for it to be safe. So she must have something, be it a vaccine or antidote. There might be a way to heal the victims who have been stripped of their souls.”

“Fugu. That would be wonderful, but this lab equipment is an infection using Archenemy fangs, right? Is there really a way to save yourself from that?”

A Vampire and Zombie would understand just how fatal such infections were. That was why they did not wield their power too easily. That was the first rule for living in society.

However...

“Did you forget, Ayumi-chan? These blood-sucking ticks are not natural. They are reused lab equipment created for a certain purpose.”

“Oh, I get it. The Echidna might have left an opening in the specs for her own convenience. A way to quickly correct a problem if something unexpected happens to her.”

Looking at it as a means of attack, it would be uncontrollable without that. Unlike an ultimate weapon from a movie or drama, actual biological weapons

were failures if the virus would cover the entire planet. Maybe they could only reproduce for a short period, maybe they were weak to the outside air or UV, and maybe a defensive line could be set up by disinfecting with fire or alcohol. Whatever the case, if you did not build in a weakness and could not limit the area over which it spread, your virus would eventually reach the other side of the planet and infect your own family.

“...Let’s review the problems here.”

While soaking wet, we began the discussion in a locker room positioned halfway between the upper levels and middle levels.

This area would not last long either. Either the humans or the Archenemies would make their way here.

“Absolute Noah is divided between the humans and the Archenemies. The humans hold the engine room on the lower levels and the Archenemies hold the living areas on the upper levels. But the Echidna is actually using blood-sucking ticks to control the Archenemies and is using their movements to force the humans into the lower levels. That pressure has triggered rioting among the humans. In other words, the Echidna holds everything in the palm of her hand.”

“Satori-kun. Is it possible all of the human side has been infected by the blood-sucking ticks as well?”

“I doubt it. If so, there would be no need to divide everyone onto two sides. The Echidna could simply rule as the queen of the ark. Also, it wouldn’t make any sense for dad to be acting independently.”

But why not?

Wouldn’t it be faster to infect the humans like Erika suggested?

“Fugu. What if?”

“Ayumi?”

“Even for us, wasn’t it odd that we managed to escape that wide variety of Archenemies while protecting you, Onii-chan?”

“...What? Are you suggesting the Echidna’s group went easy on us?”

“Or what if someone controlled by the blood-sucking ticks can’t use their

special abilities as an Archenemy? Like a mermaid's song."

So were their movements simplified like with Zombies? If the Echidna wanted the humans to do something, was she intentionally leaving their intelligence intact while guiding them in that direction?

We couldn't find an answer to that, but something else was actually more important.

Yes.

"...Then what happened to the Calamity?"

"Fuguu?"

"I mean, think about it. If the humans went berserk because they succumbed to the pressure from the Archenemies and the Archenemies are being controlled by the Echidna's blood-sucking ticks, then everything is explained. There's no room for the ultimate moral hazard we call the Calamity."

...Were we overlooking something?

No, the Calamity definitely existed. Urp. Otherwise, I wouldn't have pushed Erika onto that kitchen counter and raised the butcher's knife.

In that case...

Where had *that* gone???

"Ugh... Truth, where are we? I feel like I missed a lot."

"Don't worry about any of it. It's all my fault."

Anastasia's eyes were darting around while I held her in my arms and she seemed to notice Erika and Ayumi.

Then she spoke.

"...Truth, you're the one that doesn't need to worry about it. If you managed to find your sisters, then you did what you needed to do."

"..."

I could not respond.

I had done nothing worthwhile since entering Absolute Noah. I had turned a

knife on my sister in my confusion, I had abandoned Anastasia, I had placed my dad in danger to recover from that mistake, and I had let the Banshee and Sylpheed be infected by the Echidna's blood-sucking ticks...and turned into devices for her creature lab.

So it was all my fault.

But I could not stop here. I simply could not.

No matter how terribly I had been doing, this would never improve if I did nothing. Pulling back my hand would not shrink the wound. So I had to keep rolling the dice and bear with it until luck was on my side once more.

It was time to show some human strength.

"There's so much we don't know, so let's think through it together."

"...Right."

Now that Anastasia was awake, I began speaking again.

"Mom, there's something I want to know. How much did Absolute Noah's members know about the Calamity? This giant ark had to have been created based on some kind of data. Earthquake shelters and typhoon shelters are designed entirely differently, so what exactly is this?"

I was talking about concrete data on a disaster so frightening that everyone wanted to shut their eyes and pretend it did not exist. Just like a prophecy of destruction, it had bound so many people's hearts with negative emotions.

My stepmom held her soaking wet body in her arms and breathed out a bit.

"Well, it began with gathering old wall paintings and oral legends. We knew something had happened in the distant past, but what exactly was it? We began by comparing multiple sources and organizing the information."

"So not much different from investigating large earthquakes..."

"Once we had a vague idea of the Calamity, we gradually revealed its outlines with function calculations using numbers on paper and slide rules, but an explosive advance was made in the previous century. That was the arrival of computers. Specifically, a simulator using vacuum tubes."

“...”

“Absolute Noah’s roots go back to antiquity, but its advances are not proportional to the flow of time. It is much more closely related to the history of calculation technology, memory storage technology, and data processing. God will only save the chosen from the flood and we know that ‘we’ will not be chosen. So we can’t just rely on others for this. By bringing together those afraid of that general apocalypse, we managed to acquire a large boat.”

“...So right now, a computer like Maxwell is being used as the one-and-only and inviolable scriptures of an organization large enough to move the world?”

...There was a chance we could use that.

The Archenemies would not listen to anything we said since they were fully controlled by the Echidna’s blood-sucking ticks. But what about the humans? They had gone berserk from fear of the Archenemies, but what they feared most was the Calamity and the end of the world.

I didn’t have to rely on the idea that there was innate goodness in everyone. I only had to overwrite their fear with a greater fear.

“I don’t know what led the Echidna to do what she’s doing, but that book of prophecy has to reside deep within her heart as well.”

“Y-yes. Otherwise, she would not have joined Absolute Noah.”

“Mom, that book of prophecy should be accessible by anyone inside here. I want to see it. Maxwell, let’s try predicting the Echidna’s thought process based on the prophecy data.”

“Sure. If we could recreate Archenemy Echidna’s actions within my system, we could predict her actions and that would greatly increase your odds of survival.”

“Fugu? You mean we don’t have to figure out a password in some special room?”

“There’s no charisma in a book of prophecy no one can read. Mom.”

According to Amatsu Yurina, any terminal inside Absolute Noah could indeed access the simulation data. They had built this ark while watching the world

breaking, like they were viewing a train schedule.

Of course, it only let us read it, not rewrite it. But our goal was to read what it said so we held the same thing that the Echidna did. If Maxwell could use that to reproduce her thoughts, we would have an easier time understanding her goal and predicting her actions.

“Anastasia. Let’s use the panel next to the barrier.”

“Understood. I’ll spoof a connection from a different access point, so wait just a second. After all, we have Maxwell-chan as a host.”

She removed the protective cover, connected her small robot dog with a cable, and did some detailed work. Once we had called up the barrier control panel’s system screen, we reconnected to the internal network.

“There we go, there we go.”

“Let’s take a look, Truth.”

And we found...

- Rioting.
- Reduction in normative consciousness.
- Ruin.
- Takeover of the ruling class.
- Deterioration of tragic memories.
- Explosive expansion.
- Global mass hysteria.
- Resignation.
- Ephemeral hedonism.
- Outlets for frustrations based on discrimination.

- Desire for ruin.
- Negative chain reactions.
- Moral hazards.
- Concrete actions.

...These were not Nostradamus-style vague phrases that could apply to anything.

This gave an organized list of the ways to make someone hate the world and it backed it all up with numbers.

There was no sign of emotion there. It calmly described how humanity would break as if reading off the answers at the end of a textbook.

It was like an immutable schedule describing everything from the beginning of the end to the end of the end.

“...What is this...?”

I was apparently not the only one whose legs grew weak. Ayumi placed her hand on the wall and Erika was trembling despite supposedly supporting our stepmom. Amatsu Yurina would have already known all this, but she groaned quietly at seeing it again.

This was a poison.

You could not view it or touch it. It was a powerful poison with a strong pull that would cause your worries and doubts to endlessly grow until you checked on it for yourself, despite knowing nothing good would come of that.

Getting tangled in this would destroy anyone. You would begin to view yourself as wise for taking early action against the coming ruin and you would see yourself as a lonely but just person who paid no heed to the criticisms of the ignorant and peace-dulled world.

It could be bad for your mental health when something was *too* simple. Some people claimed not to believe anything they had not seen for themselves, but this was the ultimate argument that would force them to change their view.

However.

“User.”

“What is it, Maxwell?”

“Part of this makes no sense. There are no parameters for the target access point. What am I connected to?”

“What...?”

This was the planetary simulator that had precisely calculated out the ruin of the entire human race. Wouldn't it be a supercomputer larger than a school building?

“What do you mean there are no parameters? Are you saying these are corrupted packets without the proper values inside?”

“No. That kind of trick would only trigger an error report.”

“...So it's a nonexistent computer?”

The data on the screen was indeed the worst I could imagine. And my stepmom's group had built the ark based on it.

But where had it come from?

What was the identity of this ghostly simulator?

“No. That is not it. How should I put it? It uses a format I have never seen before. Perhaps you could say electric signals alone cannot explain it because it is managed with more than just 0s and 1s.”

What was that supposed to mean?

But Maxwell would not intentionally lie. In that case, the words had to mean something.

And just as I thought that, something happened.

“Oh? I really should compliment you for noticing something was off using just a handmade machine.”

A voice intruded as if speaking over the phone.

It was Archenemy Echidna.

Charlotte Fregula.

...She had already broken into the signal!?

I quickly turned toward at Anastasia, but the tiny white hacker shook her head and pointed at her robot dog.

“I’m not receiving an alert. And there shouldn’t have been any way to detect the connection!”

Since Maxwell controlled the security network which primarily included the security cameras, physical observation was out of the question. But then how had she detected our actions!?

“You are looking at this wrong. You have come into contact with me simply by reading the book of prophecy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know? Not all processors are made from silicon wafers. All of us come equipped with a much more impressive organ.”

The blood vessels on my temple throbbed disconcertingly.

No.

It couldn’t be, no, there was no way!

“My brain. That is the identity of Absolute Noah’s planetary simulator and this generation’s book of prophecy.”

.....

It wasn’t possible.

It just couldn’t be possible!

“Wait, Charlotte! I know the Echidna cannot use intelligence that advanced as a weapon!”

“Of course not. But have you forgotten, Lilith? I can procure everything I need. That way I need not give up on those violent children who I could never give birth to with my own belly alone.”

“...?”

My stepmom had argued back on reflex, but even she was confused by this one.

However, the worst possibility gradually dawned on us.

“You don’t mean...!”

“Yes, I myself am one of my lab creations. I am an artificial living simulator that can be used for evolutionary experiments. In other words, I am a version of myself with a more developed brain. The brain and organs have all been fully updated. All to optimize the brain chemicals, hormones, and chemical reactions in the blood.”

“...You’re kidding, right? But you said your creations don’t have a soul.”

“I was not created from scratch in the lab, so I think the soul has transferred into this body. But during the many modifications, who can say how much of that formless thing has been carved away. And no matter how much you try to deny it, I have achieved my goal and I exist here in the form I took for those children. Of course, the outer appearance was perfect already, so I left that untouched. Perhaps it is like fully replacing a car’s engine and suspension. And after around 79 such customizations, my specs have reached the level needed for a planetary simulator.”

This was different from a Demon Lord who possessed great power as an individual. It was also different from a Zombie or Vampire who could cause a pandemic throughout the city.

This was the Echidna.

What she laid out was somehow different.

“Why...?”

“The book of prophecy is the core of Absolute Noah. By placing myself as that indispensable pillar, the organization cannot eliminate me no matter what I do. Just like all those silly old people in positions of power. This was no more than the necessary insurance.”

“No, not that. Why do you hate the ark so much, Charlotte!?”

“You don’t get it? No, the others might not, but you must understand,

Archenemy Lilith. Because we are the same.”

My stepmom slowly inhaled and seemed to be processing those words in her head.

“What am I supposed to understand? Should I assume your ultimate target is Archenemy Lilith?”

“Of course not. I said we are the same, didn’t I? Or is your heyday too painful to remember in front of your son and daughters?”

“...Charlotte, you...”

“Yes. Orthrus, Cerberus, Hydra, the Nemean lion. They were all children of mine. I designed them in my lab and those adorable children were far too powerful for my belly to contain them.”

I lived with a Vampire older sister and a Zombie little sister, but those names did not sound like anything from reality. It made me think of video games before mythology.

But that was who this was.

Her roots may have gone even further back than Demon Lord Lilith’s.

She was Archenemy Echidna.

“You understand how unfair it is, don’t you? You understand the heartrending pain of seeing your adorable children – the crystallizations of your love – trampled underfoot until none of them survive, don’t you!? You understand the hell of experiencing the sorrow of seeing the child leave this world before the parent and seeing it happen over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, don’t you!?”

“...”

“We are the same!! The Echidna gave birth to the hideous children who would oppose the gods and Lilith gave birth to countless formless evil spirits and demons who would bring chaos to the world!! But none of it mattered. All because of those gods and heroes who declared them ‘ugly’ and ‘filthy’ and then attacked them. Yes, yes. Why did all of my children have to be slaughtered!?”

“...That doesn’t add up,” I said without thinking. “Then what are those blood-sucking ticks? And you repeatedly remade your body, right? If you can create all of that to make up for the gaps in your skills, you couldn’t possibly feel like that...”

“Don’t act like you understand, brat! My lab was meant to safely give birth to my adorable children. But what good are cribs and bottles when you don’t have any children to use them? No good at all! Yes, Orthrus, Chimaera, and Karkinos were complete failures, but Hydra more than made up for those failings. Oh, my adorable elite...”

...I kind of got it.

I felt like the core of Archenemy Echidna, aka Charlotte Fregula, had come into view.

“You...”

I must have had a look of utter astonishment on my face.

She had shown us all sorts of strange things so far, but...

“You ranked your children...? Even though you gave birth to them all!?”

“Oh? But everyone does that. Do you take the smart older brother or the dumb younger brother? Do you show your love to the beautiful little sister or to the ugly big sister? Who will inherit the family business, who is needed for a political marriage, who can you brag about as a parent, who will bring the most social status? You can say whatever you like, but everyone needs to have a favorite when you get down to it.”

...I.

I had been through a lot with my parents’ divorce, but I still truly believed I had been blessed all along.

After all, I had never once been subject to that absurd loneliness or anger. Ayumi, Erika, and I had entirely different specs, and were even from different species. To be honest, I didn’t stand a chance against my sisters in an intellectual or physical challenge. But we were allowed to be equal siblings in our family. Thanks to our parents.

Archenemy Echidna.

That mother had given birth to monster after monster.

But was that her children's fault? Wasn't it due to how she was? The Hydra and Cerberus had never been taught how to control the power they were born with and they were isolated from society, so wasn't that why they had been made into a target for the heroes!?

"...So let's say the Cerberus, the Nemean lion, and your other beloved children were killed in the distant past as a test of courage or whatever. Let's say that isn't just something from a fantasy game and the tragedy was real."

"Yes?"

"Then what do you want here and now? What do you want with Absolute Noah!?"

"Isn't that obvious? I have just one objective: revenge."

...?

"How does that make any sense!? Those heroes are so long gone not even their bones still exist! Or are you saying you can't forgive humanity as a whole!?"

"I honestly couldn't care less about humans."

This was no more than a voice from a panel's flat screen, but it still shook me.

"But my fellow mother of monsters will know who my true target is. She will know what it is I resent."

"...Mom?"

I looked over to see Amatsu Yurina's eyes opened wider than I had ever seen them.

What was this? Were those words really such a shock???

"The story of the ark tells of people avoiding a worldwide disaster. But the story requires one precondition to function."

No.

Wait. Don't tell me...!

"It must begin with a formless god telling the people that a flood is coming and commanding them to build a boat."

"That's what you're after...?"

"I don't know what the gods are thinking, nor do I care to find out. But they might not like it if I raze the surface of the earth and build a large enough pile of corpses that the toxic smoke rises to heaven. ...We will defile the world. We will do the last thing they want. Even if it is no more than the human race destroying themselves based on a nonexistent end-times theory."

"You mean you don't care about humanity and this is only meant to give you a chance to directly attack the gods at the source of it all!?"

"Of course. The heroes and humans are no more than pawns of the gods. If I am to avenge those children, I must remove the heads of the gods giving orders at the very top, don't I?"

This had reached a level where not even a disaster environment simulator like Maxwell could keep up.

But whether or not she could actually strike back at the gods was not the issue. It only mattered that the Echidna had come this far believing that she could.

Did she see herself as building a Tower of Babel up to heaven!?

"But word of the Calamity hasn't spread across the world to the extent needed to wipe out humanity. Wild@Hunt's drone disaster was stopped and the world avoided a global depression caused by the giant corporation's collapse. Absolute Noah only contains a few thousand! Are you saying the gods will make a visit over chaos on that level!?"

"Oh? But the scriptures will soon be spread all over the world."

The Echidna's tone of voice had not changed. Was all of this still according to her plan?

And just as I thought that...

"Why do you think I sent all the humans to the lower levels so they would

take over the engine room? A careful investigation of the scriptures' simulation data would eventually show a flaw, which is why it must be blown away and elevated to the level of an 'unknowable legend'."

"Y-..."

...You...!?

That's what she was having my dad and the others do!?

"If Absolute Noah blows up and splits the Japanese Archipelago in two, there will be no covering it up. The existence of the ark will be public knowledge, with the extra knowledge that it failed and the end of the world is truly inescapable. So what will remain? The Calamity, a general fear of the world ending, and the fact that the only true prophetic simulation data is inside my head."

It was just like the end of the previous century when everyone relied on Nostradamus...no, on writers and producers who borrowed his words.

The Echidna intended to inherit everything from Absolute Noah.

Was she trying to turn herself into the global book of prophecy that would bring misfortune and disaster so she could plunge the entire planet into chaos!?

"Let us speak of the lost prophecies. Everything was written there, but it was all lost in a foolish explosion. Thus, those of you who remain have no choice but to live in fear of unavoidable ruin."

The panel whispered in a singsong voice.

"...Wouldn't that have enough of an impact to create a few new myths and religions? Or perhaps it would trigger the Calamity much more simply than the collapse of Wild@Hunt."

If the ark was lost, then she could not escape the Calamity either. She would be caught in the very fire she had set.

Was she only interested in confronting the gods and avenging her "adorable" children? Had she abandoned even the idea of her own survival?

"No matter how much logic you use in rational pursuit of an answer, you can never fully erase those nagging 'what ifs' and 'could it bes'."

There was only her laughing voice.

“The humans in the engine room are doing their job, oblivious to the fact that they were guided there. Their outward anger is no more than a byproduct of what fills their hearts: a deep-rooted fear and resignation. If the alternative is being bitten by the Archenemies on the upper levels and becoming a living corpse with no free will, they will choose to blow themselves up while they remain pure. ...And none of them will know what trigger it is they are pulling.”

I glanced toward Anastasia who shook her head after fiddling with the small robot dog.

...So the Echidna really was better than her...

Then there was no need to hesitate. It would be very bad if Maxwell was infected.

I grabbed a nearby fire extinguisher and swung it down on the barrier control panel we had been relying on. With a sound of shattering glass and some sparks, I forcefully severed the connection.

“Phew.”

What did we need to do? There was a lot, but we had to think through it all.

“One, we have to stop the humans down there with dad from detonating the engine room. Two, we need to find a cure for the blood-sucking ticks to save the Banshee, the Sylpheed, and the others. Third, we need to settle things with the Echidna. That’s three major hurdles.”

They all looked like separate tasks at first, but they were all aboard Absolute Noah. We could actually streamline them together.

Meaning...

“We need to find a way to the lower levels and meet up with dad and the others.”

“That would be great...but, Satori? Are you sure you want to prioritize family here?”

“This isn’t just about emotion. The blood-sucking tick infection hasn’t spread to the humans. The Echidna chose not to infect them so they could blow up the

engine room, so the odds are good that the vaccine or cure is located with the humans. I just doubt they would recognize it if they saw it.”

“Fuguu. In that case...”

“We don’t need to think of these as separate issues. We start by heading down to regroup with dad, stop the human rampage, and prevent the explosion. Then we find the emergency cure and free the Banshee, the Sylpheed, and the others from the blood-sucking ticks. Finally, we bring the fight to the Echidna. It’s all one continuous ‘flow’. There are no wasted steps.”

There did not seem to be any objections.

In that case, the question was how to actually get down to the lower levels with all the rioters there.

“They have checkpoints set up everywhere, so we can’t use the stairs or elevators. The ducts and garbage chutes would also be difficult. We discussed all that earlier, but...”

“Oh?”

For some reason, Erika pressed her hands together in front of her large chest and cut me off with a smile.

She made a suggestion while still smiling.

“If we only have to get down to the lower levels, then didn’t you already give us the answer, Satori-kun?”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“The garbage chutes. Unlike the ducts, they won’t be blocked with filters or fans and they will be built fairly wide so the garbage doesn’t clog them up. Couldn’t someone use one as a tunnel if they climbed inside?”

“No, wait. I don’t know how many levels Absolute Noah has in all, but it’s apparently at least a few hundred meters vertically. Fall straight down there and you’ll go splat when you hit the bottom.”

“Yes, of course.” Erika was already opening and closing the rectangular cover on the wall nearby. “But what if there was a soft cushion in the way? Although if possible, you should really hold out your arms and legs as brakes.”

“A cushion? Breaks? ...Wah.”

I did not have time to question it.

Erika turned toward me so her back was to the open garbage chute. Then she wrapped her slender arms around my head, pulled me into her large chest, and held me tight.

No, the wobbling of my weight did not end there. It was like trying to dive from the edge of boat or performing a suplex. Wait, don't tell me!

“Fuguu!”

“Sorry for stealing your thunder, Ayumi-chan, but we're in a bit of a hurry here.”

From there, it was a trip straight down.

Erika held me in her arms as she fell headfirst into the garbage chute. We were swallowed up by that vertical pit that could lead down who-knows-how-many hundreds of meters.

[Support by] Garbage Chutes [DELTA brain]

A garbage collection system primarily seen in high-rise buildings. A chimney-like hole is opened inside the wall, doors are constructed at each floor, and garbage is thrown directly inside to be gathered in a bucket or container at the bottom.

This eliminates the need to go around collecting trashcans from each floor, but cleanliness issues have been highlighted (e.g., the difficulty of cleaning the chute's inner walls and the garbage smell rising from the bottom floor), so it is not used anymore.

...Since it has garbage chutes installed, perhaps Absolute Noah took a very long time to construct. Just like how Western castles that took hundreds of years to complete often become a patchwork of different construction methods.

Chapter 9

Part 1

How many times did my body scrape along the stainless steel walls of that pit which was only a few dozen centimeters wide? No matter how much I screamed while feeling that burning pain, I couldn't prepare myself for what was coming.

Nevertheless, the end arrived without warning.

My "cushion" was crushed and it produced an extremely raw sound, feeling, and smell.

I sensed some white flickering in front of my eyes, but that was all. I had fallen several hundred meters upside-down, but I was still alive. I didn't even seem to have any broken bones.

"Erika."

"Oh, Satori-kun. Could you keep your eyes closed for a little while?"

Erika's voice sounded oddly muffled after falling head-first while holding me in her arms.

"I'll be fine as long as my heart isn't destroyed, but a girl still wants to avoid showing off her ugly side."

"..."

How long did I stay like that?

30 seconds? Or more than an hour? I couldn't seem to judge how much time had passed, but Erika eventually spoke again.

“Okay, all done. Thanks for this, Satori-kun☆”

“Erika!!”

Without thinking, I grabbed her slender shoulders and pulled my face from her large chest so I could see.

She was herself.

Even after everything that had happened, she was entirely unscathed. There was a carefree smile on her lips.

“Ahn. We had no other choice. A Zombie, Lilith, and a Silky aren’t specialized for healing and regeneration. That meant I was the only one who could act as a cushion. And since I could only hold one person, I figured it was best to drag you down with me.”

“I’m not talking about the logic of the decision! Dodge the issue any more and I really will be angry with you!!”

She gave me a gentle smile that was not at all the look of someone who had just been scolded.

“Sorry, Satori-kun. I won’t do it again.”

“Maxwell, did you record that?”

“Ehh!? You would record your family’s secrets, Satori-kun!? You’re the worst of any of us!”

“No. You looked like you had developed a taste for this, so I can’t trust that promise. Do it again and I swear I’ll never speak with you again.”

At any rate, we couldn’t just sit around at the sour-smelling bottom of the garbage chute. Some extra garbage might rain down on us from above at any moment. And that would be the same as a screw or some glass falling from a building.

The two of us crawled out of the garbage chute and found a garbage collection room just as we expected. It was still unsorted and we found ourselves on a floor that was like a shaking net. It had been flattened out to avoid any large piles and it was being taken toward a machine like a rotating roller that crushed it all. Everything from the one garbage chute led there with

no chance to separate the burnable trash from the non-burnable trash, so it was likely smashed into tiny chips and then sorted by material using magnetism, static electricity, and pressurized air.

We certainly didn't want to be caught in that, so we had to get out quickly.

However.

"This place looks deserted, but we're one door away from the human-controlled area. We need to think up a way to avoid being found."

"In the worst case, couldn't you get through just fine since you're human, Satori-kun?"

"And what about you, Erika? I can't just ask you to wait here since someone from the human side might look in here at any time. The garbage chute collection room is a dead-end, so you're screwed if you're found."

"But unlike you, I'm undead."

She pointed at the large machine that looked like a spiky rotary press and could probably crush a small car with what I can only describe as two steam roller drums pressed together like a giant mouth.

"If anything happens, I can jump *through there* where the humans can't reach me."

"..."

"Okay, okay. I get it. Don't give me that look. But self-destruction is a pretty useful advantage of being a Vampire."

The way she lightly raised her hands and stuck out her tongue suggested she had not at all learned her lesson. ...It was looking like I really needed to rake her over the coals later.

"...Maybe I should dig through your search history, Erika. Or maybe your online shopping records or watched video list."

"Wait, Satori-kun. Let's talk this out like adults."

She grabbed my shoulders and moved her face toward me with an incredible smile. I hadn't really expected a girl to be that worried about this and now I was

legitimately curious what she had been typing into her computer!

Anyway.

When I cracked open the airtight metal door and checked outside, I saw 20 or 30 people with bloodshot eyes in a hallway narrower than a school hallway. Rather than being on the way somewhere, they seemed to have been kicked out of whatever room they had been in. It did not look like they would be going anywhere anytime soon.

We had to find our dad, stop the detonation of the engine room, and secure a method of preventing and curing the blood-sucking ticks the Echidna had intentionally left around. The Echidna had said her biology lab had everything necessary to give birth to her children, so there had to be a way of stopping it as well.

I ducked back into the garbage collection room and thought.

“Maxwell, you know where my dad is, right?”

“Sure.”

It did not look like we needed to wander Absolute Noah’s labyrinthine lower levels searching for him. We only had to think about the direct path there.

However, it would be quite difficult to travel down that narrow corridor without anyone noticing. There was nowhere to hide on those smooth walls and there were no deep shadows or darkness thanks to the halogen lights lining the ceiling like in a gym. There were pipes thicker than my arm running along the walls and ceiling like in a battleship or aircraft carrier, but that was not enough to hide behind. Not even a legendary ninja or spy would be able to sneak through there.

“There are plastic tanks and drums in the trash, but I don’t see how they could help us.”

Unfortunately, it did not look like we could construct a secret weapon by combining the things in here.

We had made our way to the lower levels, but were we stuck here?

No, wait...

I wasn't going to accept Erika's self-destructive ideas, but we did have an Archenemy here. She had more freedom of movement than a human.

In that case...

"Erika, I want your help."

"Sure, sure. Leave everything to your big sis."

"And Maxwell. Use your simulator for a thought experiment."

"Please give me specific parameters."

"It's a light experiment."

Soon, Erika and I were traveling down the narrow corridor together. We of course passed by the crazed humans, but none of them noticed us.

Now, what exactly had we done?

Hint: there were pipes and powerful halogen lights on the ceiling.

"They really aren't noticing us. Oops."

"(Erika.)"

"(Sorry. I'm not supposed to talk too loud, am I?)"

It was a little embarrassing, but I had my arms and legs wrapped around her torso to tightly hold on. Given the method we were using, she needed all her Vampire limbs free. And my muscles were too weak to use this method. That meant I was stuck clinging to her like a koala with my head pressed into her large chest.

...But just as she had said, no one noticed us doing this.

Well, that was probably due to the assumption that people would walk on the floor and hide behind things sticking out from the wall.

As you probably guessed, Erika was using her arms and legs to crawl along like a spider.

We were on the ceiling.

Yes, with the thick pipes running along the walls and ceiling, there were

plenty of handholds. And thanks to the powerful halogen lights shining down, no one could see us even if they looked up.

That said, traveling along the roof while clinging to it like a spider would be impossible even for a pro climber. Not to mention with me clinging to you. This required her Vampire strength which was said to be 20 times that of a human.

It helped a lot that Maxwell had control of the security cameras.

I was only concerned about the senses other than sight.

For example, sound and smell.

“(Still...)”

I knew it was dangerous, but I couldn’t help but speak under my breath.

The scene below was worse than I had imagined.

The stench of blood was oppressively strong. There was smoke from some kind of herb. The blood came from the magic circles drawn red on the walls and floor like graffiti and the smoke was probably meant to be exorcising incense. I had no idea if they were legitimate or not, but I could hear what sounded like chanted sutras. Those noises and smells masked our presence, but I wasn’t at all happy about it.

It was not a desire to fight that was about to burst here.

Anxiety.

Unrest.

Impatience.

Terror.

Uncontrollable emotions clashed between these people and the panic continued to grow as if it were infectious. It took physical form and appeared all over this area.

This was the most unstable and dangerous state for humans.

It was a return of the terror of the witch trials that had once overrun Salem.

“Do it! Get them!!”

“Dammit, what the hell!?”

I heard shouting through a cracked metal door. Had someone mistaken their own shadow for a monster? Or could the humans not trust each other, leading to a fight?

Seeing these people only sinking further as they searched for a peace of mind forever out of their reach felt a lot like seeing the residents of hell itself. Even if every single Archenemy in the world went extinct, I doubted these people could stop this suspicion-driven conflict.

“What is happiness?” said Erika. “From a global perspective, these people were born in wealthy countries, never wanted for the necessities or even luxuries, and were even chosen to join Absolute Noah to protect them from the end of the world...and yet now that the end has arrived, they continue the conflict in order to avoid having the most unhappy life of all. If the children who work so hard to survive the hardships of poverty and war were to see it, what would they think of this utterly twisted palace?”

Everyone’s lives were different.

Kings, nobles, and commoners all had their own worries, but what comfort was that?

The people who had boarded Noah’s Ark had done the right thing. That had allowed them to survive and create a new world afterwards.

But would someone with a truly, truly kind heart have accepted the invitation to board the ark? Everyone who had remained on the land because they refused to abandon someone else close to them had been wiped out. Isn’t that why the world is the way it is? It became a world of only what is “right”, a world of people lacking in kindness. That wandering thought occurred to me here.

“(Let’s find dad.)”

“(Yes, let’s do that.)”

Erika and I crawled along the ceiling with guidance from Maxwell via the card-sized car navigation system.

Our destination was clear: the engine room.

That was the core of Absolute Noah. It was the most dangerous and most mysterious facility.

It was the source of vast amounts of energy.

If misused, the blast would not be contained by Absolute Noah's depth and the explosion would not just obliterate Kukyou City but take several prefectures along with it, splitting the Japanese Archipelago in two.

When my stepmom had told us about it, a certain image had come to mind.

“(So is this a rocket or spaceship? Or maybe a submarine or aircraft carrier?)”

“(There are nuclear rockets, aren't there? I thought those had a lot of problems, though.)”

But having Absolute Noah launched into space or submerged in the depths of the ocean would not help us here. In fact, it would only create a giant inescapable combat arena.

We had gotten this far with Erika crawling upside-down along the ceiling, but now we had to pass through a door.

“(Maxwell, I want to move the guards from the door. Sound an alarm a short distance away. Something that won't cause too much of a problem.)”

“Sure. I will limit it to water leaking from a pipe.”

A deep buzzer rang and the men grumbling in front of the door left their post and walked down the corridor.

That method would eventually stop working.

To make the most of this opportunity, Erika swiftly jumped down from the ceiling.

“Bwah.”

“Did you enjoy hugging your big sis for the first time in forever?”

...To be honest, my pride was grateful that I had avoided a nosebleed. I felt like I had enjoyed a lifetime's worth of her softness.

Anyway, we worked together to turn the round handle of the airtight door and slipped into the space beyond.

There we found...

“You’re kidding, right?”

It was a very large space.

I don’t just mean that horizontally. It had to cover 4 or 5 stories’ worth of vertical space. A bunch of halogen lights hung from the ceiling at the top, so the room was as bright as midday. There was a complex arrangement of wire mesh and steel beam scaffolding that looked something like a giant jungle gym or the beer cases seen during festivals that held countless bottles. That metal cage contained a group of structures lined up in the center of the tall space.

I honestly expected to find giant nuclear reactors or rocket boosters. That was all I could think of that would quickly produce such massive amounts of energy.

But I should have thought about it more carefully.

What did my dad research? He had looked after the Archenemies in the Bright Cross’s underground facility, so what kind of work was he being forced to do in Absolute Noah’s engine room? Even that Echidna had decided it was beyond her, so she had avoided using the blood-sucking ticks and had the humans pull the trigger of destruction on their own.

I found the answer to it all here.

Those lined-up objects were giant masses of muscle fiber.

They were beating as they carried a liquid into thick tubes that extended every which way. They were...giant...hearts?

This shocking discovery left me feeling faint, so Erika supported me from the side.

“What is this?”

They were hearts.

But they were very different from human ones. There was of course the extraordinary size, but the structure itself seemed too simple. And they were translucent, so I could see the muddy-colored liquid moving through them.

“What kind of hearts are these?”

“The Echidna used blood-sucking ticks, so these might be based on ones from small bugs. Just like her other lab equipment.”

“These aren’t her children either...? Even after going this far?”

“These were meant to be blown away as part of her negotiation with the gods. I doubt she would want to include her adorable children in that.”

These were more than just creepy. What if you took a tiny bug and made it larger than a human? It was such a horror cliché that the effect had worn off and it was used more often in action stories, but had she actually done it!?

Archenemy Echidna would create everything she needed using her lab. That could be blood-sucking ticks used to control immortals or it could be herself who she had remade time and again to acquire a supercomputer-level brain. And that lab had originally been developed to give birth to children too large and violent to carry herself.

But.

Could it be?

“Had she replaced parts of Absolute Noah itself with biological pieces of simple bugs?”

Had my stepmom, the Banshee, the Sylpheed, and the others realized her invasion had reached this far? I mean, this was just too much. If the book of prophecy deciding their course of action and the ark meant to overcome the disaster had both been replaced with the Echidna’s biological parts, then the entire Absolute Noah organization was in checkmate, wasn’t it? She had hollowed out everything, so it was just like discovering the city infrastructure that supported your life had been entirely replaced with foreign goods at some point!

“Satori-kun, this way.”

Erika led me toward the jungle gym of scaffolding. The beating of the giant translucent hearts pounded creepily at my mind more than my ears. The engine room was so tall that traveling along the ceiling would be difficult. But there were a lot of blind spots thanks to the labyrinthine arrangement of scaffolding and stairs, so unlike the narrow corridor from before, we could play hide-and-

seek like normal.

“Maxwell, let’s get to my dad. Pin his location.”

“Sure.”

But if we simply followed the pathways, we would likely be spotted by a worker (or a vet or entomologist?). Erika dodged the guards and descended toward our destination with an ever-changing route of sometimes clinging to the underside of the scaffolding and sometimes jumping over a railing for a shortcut down.

I heard a few frightened voices on the way.

“Hurry, hurry!”

“The Archenemies will break right through that barricade if they take it seriously. It’s all over once you’re bitten.”

“...I’m not going to eternally follow their orders without even death as an option. If it comes to it, I’ll take it into my own hands.”

Take it into their own hands.

Remaining pure, without being controlled.

...It was not normal for that thought process to be running rampant as a kind of virtue. They were stuck in a losing battle. They should be saying there was something wrong with this! They should be wishing to live! Couldn’t they see these emotions had been unnaturally injected into them!?

“ ...”

Vampires bit someone, usurped their soul, and controlled their mind.

Erika had been silent for a while. So was I as I listened in. What was she feeling while targeted by such unreasonable fear, rather than anger or scorn?

“You have arrived near the target,” said Maxwell.

“Erika.”

Once we arrived at the scaffolding on a certain level, I set my feet on the wire mesh floor (because Erika let me down).

I looked around but saw no sign of my dad. Instead, I saw a small prefab room within the labyrinth of scaffolding. It was probably the control room for the cranes and lifts I could see here and there.

I approached while staying low so I wouldn't be noticed through the glass covering one side.

Was my dad or someone else inside there? Even if he was inside, he might not be alone.

"Maxwell."

"Warning: there are two people other than the target."

"..."

While I pressed against the door to try to hear the voices inside, Erika stayed low and approached the window. Was she planning on breaking the glass and rushing inside!? I wanted to tell her to stop, but that would only give away our presence to the people inside.

I could not even click my tongue.

My heart pounded in my chest and sweat soaked my body as I pressed against the metal door.

If this was going to happen, I had to prepare myself. Since I could not stop Erika, I had no way of switching to a different set of rails.

"..."

"Really? ...What..."

I had trouble making out their voices at first, but my ears gradually adjusted and I could actually hear the people inside.

"I don't want to know much. Just what you injected into the third heart group."

"...The artificial adrenaline and steroids as per the list. Isn't that the answer we all calculated out together, Chief Matsuyama?"

"I don't have time to deal with your games!!"

I heard the loud sound of a chair or table rattling.

“Listen, Amatsu-kun. If your injection had followed the prescription, the heartrate should have already passed the critical point. But the blood pressure is stable and showing no sign of change! This could only happen if someone had injected them with a tranquilizer, so I want to know what kind and how much. I need accurate info!! Otherwise we have no way of removing it from the blood!!”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but if a foreign substance was mixed in, why not try dialysis?”

“Are you still saying that? If that was enough, I wouldn’t be interrogating you here!! We require the accurate injection data because you screwed it all up!!”

...I had wondered why Maxwell was not sending us the security camera footage, but this explained it.

The conversation seemed like a mix of biology and nuclear physics, but the basic nuance got through to me. This was part of the lab as well. One side wanted to send the giant bug hearts out of control while my dad was trying to keep them stable.

Speech bubbles danced on the card-sized car navigation system.

“It seems simply placing a heavy burden on the parallelized hearts will not cause an explosion. Unless they produce the specific values desired with the appropriate synchronization and chain reaction conditions, they might die of shock and simply cease beating instead of detonating.”

“And I guess my dead essentially randomized the password so not even the original user can use it.”

That messed with the other side’s plans because they had to remove and neutralize the tranquilizer before injecting the cardiogenic again.

...My dad was trying to act all cool at his age. But it was all useless now that he was caught.

Erika had arrived below the window and she made a circle with her right hand’s thumb and forefinger. Was that the okay sign or the money gesture? Damn, we really should have played an FPS together to study!!

And before I could figure out what she meant, she took action. She stood up and...oh, crap. Was she really breaking through the glass? Right then and there? It was too soon!!

“Oh, honestly!!”

I kicked the metal door as hard as I could to make a loud noise. Had that distracted everyone inside? I couldn't see the result as Erika shattered the window and entered the prefab control room.

A cacophony of destruction followed.

“Warning,” said Maxwell.

“I know! Maxwell, this door opens inwards, right? When the people inside run this way, use your security privileges to deactivate the electronic lock!”

“? You don't want to lock them inside?”

“Let me fight too.”

The card reader beeped and the LED changed from red to green.

I immediately turned the doorknob and kicked the metal door. I felt a dull sensation through the steel panel and someone ended up rolling on the floor after trying to flee from Erika.

“Nice one, Satori-kun.”

This was no time to feel embarrassed. While the doctor or scientist rolled around in pain, my sister's heel dug quite forcefully into the center of his face.

Our dad had his arms and legs tied to a random folding chair with wire. He had bruises on his face. When I saw that, I stomped on the gut of the middle-aged man lying unconscious on the floor.

Our dad could barely move, but he did seem panicked.

“What are you-...no, how did you get here!?”

“You and mom can lecture Erika later.”

With that, I removed the wires digging tightly into his wrists.

“Warning: workers are headed your way after hearing the commotion. There

are 30 to 40 of them. At least some of them are armed with guns.”

“What about this guy?”

If those were standard equipment, the man convulsing on the ground would also have one. There was indeed a black glistening handgun in his belt, just like in a movie, but I had no intention of touching it.

Instead, Erika pulled out the handgun and messed with the safety switch and magazine.

“A .45 full-auto custom... The bullets are made from sub-zero-treated consecrated silver that was soaked in supercooled holy water while it hardened. With these, they can probably hold me back by just firing enough that at least one shot is bound to hit.”

“I don’t really get it, but are you saying even you’d have trouble in a head-on fight?”

“More or less.”

In that case, it was obvious humans like our dad and me could never hope to accomplish anything.

“The enemy is estimated to arrive in less than 180 seconds,” said Maxwell.
“What are my instructions?”

“...”

What weapons did we have?

We had to set aside the reality (or lack thereof) of a shootout like in a Hollywood movie. I had a Vampire older sister and a simulator that controlled the security system. I could cheat like crazy.

“Maxwell, check the fire-fighting equipment.”

“Sure.”

“And, Erika, sorry about making you fight back-to-back battles, but I’m relying on you.”

“Well, I am best suited for the task. But don’t forget that I’m still a girl waiting for her prince to arrive ☆”

“And finally, dad.”

“Y-yeah...?”

“I tried to choose the safest path for you, but you could still die if you screw it up. No matter what we do, the odds of that happening are greatest for us humans. So prepare yourself.”

Outside the broken window, I caught glimpses of men in work jumpsuits and lab coats on the scaffolding. If one of them succumbed to the pressure and started firing randomly, it could cause a panic and send a hail of bullets raining down on us.

The phone for an internal line hidden within the control room’s many control panels began to ring. My dad pressed the speakerphone button and simple words came out.

“I don’t know who has taken that place, but we are aware of the oddity. We will wait 10 seconds, so disarm yourself and step outside. Otherwise we will turn the building into Swiss cheese.”

“(45 caliber consecrated silver can fire right through the prefab walls. And they have to know that.)”

That meant they could slaughter everyone inside if they fired a full-auto barrage from outside without leaving any room to dodge.

But it was too bad for them.

The same conditions applied to us. We did not need to step outside the control room to fight. And it didn’t matter how many dozens or hundreds we were up against.

If I was being greedy, I would have asked for the window to be intact, but what was done was done.

We had to end this before their countdown was over.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Follow the task. ...Scatter fire-fighting carbon dioxide to bring them all

down!!”

Chemical plants and server rooms could not use water, so they would stop fires with nitrogen or carbon dioxide gas instead of sprinklers.

And the balance of the air was more sensitive than people thought, so just a 10% difference in the oxygen level could knock people out.

As soon as a white smoke obscured the view, I tackled my sister and dad to the floor. I didn’t want some randomly fired shots to hit us. I heard a surprised voice from the phone that I could no longer remember the location of.

“Wha-!? Cough, damn you...!!”

I heard sporadic dry bursting sounds and felt the shockwave of something hitting the wall nearby, but that was all. It was not as intense a hail of gunfire as they had threatened. They had not even had time to squeeze their index fingers.

“This will knock everyone out. Including dad and me. But whoever remains conscious to the end is the strongest of us all. And it doesn’t matter how many of them there are if they’re collapsed on the floor.”

“You idiot. Is that a child’s voice? Oxygen builds up in the blood. Cough, just like poison resistance, the bigger your build and the greater your weight, the higher your capacity. Pant, pant. A child will never be the last one standing!”

Oops. They could hear me while it was on speakerphone.

But they were too naïve.

“...It may have been unfair to not tell you this.”

“What...?”

“I have – cough – a Vampire older sister.”

“!?”

“And...I’ve never seen anything saying...Vampires are weak to nitrogen or carbon dioxide...”

I felt dizzy. My head hurt.

My vision flashed in and out like a dying fluorescent light, so it looked like I would be dropping out pretty soon.

“Maxwell... Once everyone but Erika has been neutralized, reactivate the ventilation fan. Get the incombustible gas out of here...”

I could not see the response message.

...My blurring vision scattered and I no longer felt like I was breathing.

I awoke to the sensation of someone gently shaking my shoulder.

“...ri-kun. Satori-kun.”

“Uuh...”

My entire head was throbbing like it was swelling out from within. How long had it been? 5 minutes? 5 hours? I couldn't even hazard a guess. I was propped up like a sick person and I noticed the white smoke had entirely vanished.

“I have finished tying up everyone in this...third heart group? Well, let's just call it the engine room. But the corridors outside are still an unknown, so staying here would not be a good idea. Since we managed to find dad, I think we should leave as soon as possible.”

“Y-yes. No, wait.”

I shook a head that felt far too heavy to be mine.

“...Are you feeling light-headed too, Erika? The Echidna must have hid a method of preventing and healing the blood-sucking ticks here on the lower levels so the humans would not be affected. If we don't locate and secure that emergency safety, we can't save the Banshee, the Sylpheed, and the others.”

Erika and I turned toward our dad.

He raised his hands a little.

“That's the first I've heard of that. What are these ticks?”

“They're 0.12mm, probably making them the smallest fang users in the business.”

I began thinking while explaining the situation to him. This was that Echidna we were talking about. Had she given birth to an Archenemy specialized for prevention and treatment? She was powerful, but not almighty. Was that all she could do...?

“Erika, are there any Archenemies with a special healing skill? Something that could be used for a defense method in a lab...”

“Well...if you want to focus on the healing of wounds and antidotes to poisons while exclude Vampires and others that make you undead, then there’s the Unicorn, the Phoenix, and the Japanese mermaid. There aren’t many of them, but there are some.”

...But all of those seemed too big and noticeable for something to remain on the lower levels ruled by the human side and their anti-Archenemy mass hysteria. I felt like this had to be something that could hide easily by turning invisible or passing through walls or something.

“A Caladrius.” Our dad started saying something weird. “I heard a small bird chirping near the vents. Even if people can’t enter the vents, a bird could create a nest out of wire hangars like crows do in the city.”

“What is a Caladrius?”

“It is an Archenemy that looks like a small bird, but stops by hospital windows and absorbs the sickness within. Although if the Caladrius cannot absorb the sickness, that proves it is an incurable disease, so in some regions it is apparently seen as a sign of death.”

Was that like how the Banshee was hated as the bearer of death even though she only sniffed out the scent of death and wept?

...But that was perfect.

It was small enough to hide anywhere and it specialized in healing. It was exactly the kind of Archenemy the Echidna would want. It would make perfect sense if she had given birth to a special one that acted as a vaccine for the blood-sucking ticks.

“Then did the Echidna actually give birth to the Caladrius? Did she create that adorable child using her lab or her own belly?”

“No.” My dad raised an objection. “It probably has a similar function, but it is not actually that. For one thing, if everything here was her doing, I doubt she would give birth to a new life with the things she was spreading around.”

“What...? But weren’t these giant bug hearts originally part of her lab? Weren’t they symbols of how many children she has?”

“Her lab, hm? These are too powerful to act as a surrogate mother. Even if you could create a life within them, the soul would remain in the womb even after cutting out the child’s body. If that was a disposable lab, she might have been able to give the child freedom by cutting away the flesh surrounding it. But that would just be a lump of flesh that crawls around. And as an immortal, it could not die. It would never desire the specs that the Echidna herself had planned out. She could not create a Caladrius even if she tried to. This was never a lab meant to give birth to children. It was designed as a weapon.”

“ ... ”

“If the Echidna here is the one that did not meet the fate seen in the legends, I can more or less guess what is going on here. She wants an even stronger child. One so strong that no hero can defeat it. ...If continually building up her lab can never achieve that, then she might want to sweep the world clean, eliminate all of the dangerous heroes, and leave behind a safe environment for her children. In that case, this ark is only in her way.”

...I couldn’t believe it.

It all seemed to make sense. It did seem like a way to take revenge. And that was what made it so frightening. I mean, this wouldn’t work. The heroes had attacked the monsters because they were seen as dangerous. Her attempt to protect her children would only invite a greater threat to them. The Echidna would only be further attacked and her battle would never end.

My dad rubbed his stubbly chin.

“Either way, you would likely see a similar effect even if it was part of her lab. This thing shaped like a small bird should be the key.”

“Then let’s leave the engine room and head to the vent with the bird’s nest. Dad, where did you hear the chirping?”

“Nearby. It’s less than 50 meters from the engine room’s top-level door.”

...That was a huge number for something within the same building or vehicle, but it did not seem that odd inside Absolute Noah.

“But how do we get the people away?” asked Erika. “I got here carrying Satori-kun, but the ceiling route might be difficult with dad as well...”

“Eh? In that case...”

People would be watching the engine room’s doors after all that gunfire, but we needed to pass through that narrow corridor without being seen. I couldn’t think of any option other than the ceiling.

“No, this might actually work.”

“Dad?”

“If Yurina’s suggestion was approved, then Maxwell should be in control of the security. That’s how you activated the incombustible gas earlier, right? Then we just have to use the equipment against them.”

My dad pointed straight up.

And he explained.

“We are deep underground with no windows. Shut off the lights and ignore the requests for emergency lights and everything will be covered in a darkness so deep no one can see you even if you grab them by the nose. Then a Vampire’s night vision will come in handy.”

Now that he mentioned it...

Even if people were gathered in front of the metal door like a crowded train, we could slip into the crowd once they could not see each other. When trapped in a cage with ferocious beasts, the safest thing was to be mistaken for one of the beasts.

“But won’t some of them use flashlights or cellphone backlights?”

“That’s fine. With everyone crowded in together, their bodies will block the light. It’s like sticking a light in a thicket and turning it on. You don’t have to worry about everyone being able to see unless light shines down evenly from

above.”

It was time to double check what we had to do.

First, we had to climb the 4 or 5 stories’ worth of engine room scaffolding to reach the metal door at the very top. Once we shut off the lights and filled the lower levels in darkness, we would use the confusion to open the metal door, hide within the crowd, and reach the duct containing the nest for the small bird based on the Caladrius. It sounded like the giant translucent bug hearts could not be detonated easily due to my dad messing with the chemicals, so we would then head up and free the Archenemies from the blood-sucking ticks’ control.

It was in sight.

The Echidna had messed everything up, but it finally looked like we could end this.

Or so I thought.

A moment later, something else arrived.

“Really, humans are such ugly creatures it makes you wonder if god really loved them at all.”

An unpleasant-smelling muddy-colored mass fell from directly above.

“Satori-kun!!”

Erika tugged on my arm and I rolled across the wire mesh pathway surrounding the top of the bug hearts. A heavy mass had fallen where I had been standing.

It had a muddy sticky liquid over its head and it had originally been a symbol of decadent beauty. It had reflective white skin and long hair the color of sweet milk tea. It was a combination of a beautiful woman and a giant snake that sparkled with different rainbow colors depending on the angle.

“The Echidna!? How!?”

She only stood there, but that was enough to cover the wire mesh floor and metal railings with brown scales. They throbbed like internal organs. ...Her weaponized cradle was already spreading.

That woman had a more oppressive presence than the giant translucent bug hearts filling this space. Was that because they were no more than a part of her lab, no matter how large they might be?

This was none other than Charlotte Fregula who had agitated the humans into a panic that locked all Archenemies out of Absolute Noah's lower levels. If the humans saw all Archenemies as targets of fear, then I doubted they would let her in, so how had she gotten here when she was so messy and conspicuous?

Wait.

Messy?

"Did you come here through the blood vessels connected to the giant hearts?"

"They are circulating 2 tons of fluid every second. As long as you have an immortal body capable of enduring the water pressure, it can carry you here before you even run out of breath."

But why had the Echidna herself come here?

...This was something she could not entrust with the other Archenemies. When controlled by the blood-sucking ticks, the others could not use their special skills like a Mermaid's song or a Banshee's prophecies. This area had originally been full of humans. Sending in an Archenemy weakened by the ticks would only get them surrounded and ganged up on. And if they brought the tiny ticks with them, it could spread the infection to the humans and prevent them from doing their precise work. So she had been forced to come here herself.

If she felt such an urgent need to put out this fire, then we must have been right. The small bird modeled after the Caladrius was somewhere on the lower levels of Absolute Noah and we could use that to retrieve the Archenemies from the blood-sucking ticks. Once the Echidna's control system crumbled, they would stop applying needless pressure to the humans who feared the immortal. Then things would gradually calm down!

The end was within sight and we didn't have to hurt anyone else. Not among the humans or the Archenemies.

Echidna.

Charlotte Fregula.

As long as we could get past the battle with her! We could free the Banshee, the Sylpheed, and the others from the bonds of the blood-sucking ticks!!

“You falsely believe that there is always a correct answer within the options available to you. That in itself is insolence, human.”

With a look of utter displeasure, the Echidna brought her hands behind her back.

And she pulled out...

“Sub...machineguns!?”

“Satori-kun!!”

She pulled out two submachineguns which were even more brutal than what those doctors or scientists had had.

Erika grabbed me and jumped to the side. She did not follow the wire mesh pathway. She jumped from pathway to pathway while clearing the entire sections containing giant bug hearts.

But that did not matter to the Echidna.

We did manage to get behind a large lift, but she still pulled both triggers.

With a series of dry popping sounds, orange sparks scattered from the walls and railings. Then something inexplicable happened.

“Gh!?”

After Erika groaned and doubled over, I saw a dark red hole in the upper arm of her gothic dress.

“Did you forget what I did to my own brain!?” roared the Echidna.

Erika grabbed my arm and threw herself over the railing, but it changed nothing. No matter what kind of acrobatics she attempted, each time I heard gunshots and saw sparks, a hole opened in her side and then her thigh!

“That woman...!!”

“Warning: After repeatedly and calculatedly expanding her mental abilities, the Echidna’s brain has reached the level of a planetary simulator. She is likely performing predictive ballistic calculations and then using ricochets to target you from multiple angles.”

“On the planetary level!? Then there’s no hope of escaping these pinball shots! You can only reproduce a single city, Maxwell, so the difference in power is too great!!”

Landing on the wire mesh pathway below was the most Erika could manage. She immediately leaned on the railing.

“Ah, ahh.”

She clenched her teeth.

But she could not hold it in.

“Aghh!

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

“Erika? Erika!!”

What was this?

It was like she was suffering from a poison. What was it she had said? .45 caliber consecrated silver? Was that the reason!?

“Again, have you forgotten?” said the voice from above. “I am the Echidna, an Archenemy who can procure whatever I might need. Including everything my adorable children need.”

...Could it be?

Was that what the bullets fired from the submachineguns were!?

“Ghh!!”

Erika had to force herself. She dug her fingernails into her upper arm, tore the bullet out along with a chunk of flesh around it, and tossed it aside.

It was...

It fell through the gaps in the wire mesh, but from the glimpse I caught...it looked like a small hermit crab?

The rifling of the gun spun the solid and sharp tip of the shell like a drill to stab deep into the target's flesh and then it used its claws and mouth to tear through their flesh from within.

Was this another piece of lab equipment? What was it this time? A drill to break through a thick eggshell? The wire and thread to stop internal bleeding? Either way, what would happen if these stayed in your body!?

Erika did her side next.

When she started to reach for her thigh, her slender shoulders jumped. No, her entire body was convulsing!

"Akhah! Ughhh..."

She could not remain standing, so she leaned against the railing and slid down to a sitting position. Something bumped against her leg while she did.

Was it a toolbox?

"Satori...-kun?"

"Erika."

"Please...pull it out. Before the infection enters my body...pull out the contaminated...bullet...!!"

"!?"

With an especially intense convulsion, she kicked the toolbox aside, scattering the tools within: a hammer, a saw, a crowbar, a screwdriver, *etc.*

She gave a small nod while soaked with sweat.

I had no idea what the right thing to do was, but I was caught up in the moment. The Caladrius was only a guarantee for the blood-sucking ticks. If it didn't work on these hermit crabs, there might be no freeing Erika once she was fully infected. I grabbed a large flathead screwdriver, raised it, stopped, squeezed my eyes shut, held my breath, and...

I swung it down.

My stomach turned from the soft sensation I felt in my wrist. But it wasn't enough. Just stabbing it in wasn't the end. I recalled the turban shell cooked in

its own shell I had eaten at a beachside restaurant. You twisted your wrist and forced the contents out!

Dammit.

And I had sworn I wouldn't.

I had sworn I would never turn a blade on her again!!

"Dammit, dammit, goddammit!!"

Time seemed to slow to a crawl during that hellish process. My hands were once more soaked in her blood.

And this would not free her.

"I can fire as many shots as needed."

Our execution was announced from an unseen position far overhead.

Are you...kidding?

Just once was enough to wear down my very soul, so how much more was that monster woman going to make me do it!?

"Did you think you could solve everything on your own? Did you think justice was always on your side and you could use that to suppress your opponent as much as you liked? Quite the hero, aren't we? It's time you paid for being so conceited."

"Right back at you. You want to avenge your children who you yourself ranked? And you're going to mess with so many other lives to do it? There's no way in hell justice is on your side! You claim you'll have a chance at revenge when the destruction of the world causes the gods to act, but you're just relying on the stories of the ark and you have no actual proof or experiments to back it up!!"

I wanted to get along with humans and Archenemies alike, so I had refused to accept the Bright Cross or Absolute Noah's methods that needlessly took so many lives.

But the Echidna was different from them.

They had caused so much harm in order to protect human society from

infection or to overcome the global Calamity, but they had still been looking to the future. No matter how selfish they had been, there were people they wanted to protect.

This decadent Echidna was different.

She wanted thorough and complete destruction first and foremost. If she could accomplish something with that, she would snatch that up afterwards. In other words, it was secondary. I had my doubts she truly believed she could defeat the gods and heroes and acquire a safe environment. Because if she lost herself in her own story, she did not have to suffer any longer.

Someone had to stop this. There were no smiles at the end of the Echidna's path. No, not even for her.

But what exactly could I do?

If I obeyed this feeling and just ran out there, I knew I would not accomplish much of anything. The Echidna herself had all the designs of her lab and her brain rivaled a planetary simulator. I wanted a way to stand up to that. Wasn't there anything!?

"Wait."

Just then, I heard another voice from overhead, but this was not the Echidna.

"Do not touch my children without my permission. Aren't you forgetting someone?"

...Dad?

Erika and I fell silent in confusion.

And then...

Bang, bang, bang!!

"Dammit!! Dad!?"

It happened so quickly. That damn Echidna had pulled the trigger toward our dad!

After taking so much damage, Erika's wounds had yet to recover. But if we stayed in one place, we would be a sitting duck. I lent her my shoulder and we

searched for stairs back up to the higher level. The gunfire continued all the while. The submachineguns never seemed to stop. Even without those special infectious bullets that rivalled the blood-sucking ticks, that would be more than enough to destroy a human body beyond recognition!!

“...?”

Erika let out a questioning breath and looked up from my shoulder.

“What is it, Erika?”

“Well...something isn't right.”

“?”

“Isn't she shooting way too much? With the biology lab bullets and the perfect simulator, the very first bullet should kill a human no matter what they do...”

We looked up again. The deafening roar had yet to stop. But...the nuance seemed different somehow? It kind of sounded like the Echidna was panicking.

Erika and I finally found some stairs and climbed up.

We took it one step at a time.

And at the top, we found...

“What's wrong, Archenemy? Are your prized predictive ballistic calculations failing you? Or are the lab bullets you created nothing but duds?”

...What was that?

That was my dad standing in the open space in the middle of a metal wire mesh pathway. But how? He had no cover whatsoever and she was firing so much, but he didn't have a scratch on him! Even if she was protecting me at the time, a Vampire like Erika had failed to avoid the perfect accuracy of those pinball shots!

Our dad did not hold any kind of weapon. He only waved a blue tarp like a matador. And that tarp was full of holes...

Was he using that?

Whether it was a piece of plywood or a goldfish tank, a bullet's path was

slightly bent when it pierced some kind of obstacle. But with just that? And this wasn't just a theoretical concept. He really was standing up to full-auto fire with that!

"Something...isn't right..."

Just by standing there, that bizarre being covered the surrounding wire mesh floor and steel beam pillars with brown scales that soon began throbbing. The Echidna had long magazines inserted into her submachineguns, but even she had her eyes wide with shock. She carried a decadent beauty and her sweet milk tea hair and snake body gave off a rainbow shine.

"I've fired more than 200 shots, so how can not even one of them have hit!? And I'm not firing at random. Each individual shot should be following a deadly route to seal off every last one of your options!!"

"Yet none of that is happening. So perhaps there is an error in your calculations."

"..."

The Echidna fell silent.

But not because she was seriously considering that possibility.

"...Impossible. I made myself a part of the lab for my adorable children, so I have gained a brain rivalling a planetary simulator. I am history's greatest computer that can perfectly calculate the Calamity! A simple, single-generation lifeform's brain could never outdo my calculations!!"

"But that still leaves you at the level of a supercomputer. In the field of AI competitions, people might be desperate to read as much data on the opponent AI as possible, including their chess or shogi records, but the human brain is not that bad a thing. In a one-on-one match with no prior learning, that is played in real time rather than taking turns, and with each player's pieces placed upside-down, humans are still able to defeat computers."

Was he serious?

Was this real?

This was the world's greatest planetary simulator which held the future of 7

billion people in its hands, but our dad was fighting it like a pro shogi player challenging a supercomputer!?

“Have you forgotten? I was a Bright Cross researcher and I was a heretic who specialized handling Archenemies like you. ...I don't mean to brag about my bizarre skills, but a doctor always knows more about the patient's body than the patient themselves. I know your specs better than you do. It would be nice if you thought about what it means for me to challenge you despite that.”

He was not like my Vampire older sister or my Zombie little sister.

Nor was he like my stepmom, Demon Lord Lilith.

He had no physical strength, he had no special paranormal abilities, and he had could not infect anyone.

But he could still challenge her?

Had humans always possessed such frightening power!?

“...You're bluffing. You are only trying to confuse me to lower my accuracy. There is no way you have the specs necessary!”

“Maybe so, maybe not. But how about I help you calm your mind while I am at it. As a free service.”

She responded with gunfire, but the result did not change. The blue tarp flipped around in a bewitching way and our dad continued talking.

“One: The best Archenemy countermeasure begins with observation. Discover the discrepancy between the legends and the reality. In that since, your actions are extremely basic. No matter how good your calculations are, you still hold the gun in front of you and peer down the sight before firing. You do not use the two submachineguns independently. Ultimately, you are still visually observing your surroundings and eliminating any margin of error. Simply put, you cannot fire if you shut your eyes.

“Two: Time continues to pass while we converse like this. You could even say I was intentionally stalling for time. Of course, that is no more than suicide for me while exposed to your gunfire, but it provides someone else with an opportunity. Yes, for example, someone who can heal their wounds quite

quickly.

“Three: Since I am going to the effort of explaining this all aloud, there is someone I want to share this with. But, Charlotte, that person is not you. Now, have you figured out who the star is yet? It of course is not this dejected middle-aged man. I know how to act my age, unlike you. I am not that immature.”

“...!?”

The Echidna twisted her light brown and rainbow-sparkling snake body to turn around. More specifically, she aimed the two submachineguns toward my Vampire older sister whose wounds had healed during that long chat.

But our dad was focused elsewhere.

“Satori, I have already given you the answer.”

“Maxwell, the lights!!”

I shouted into the card-sized car navigation system.

Immediately, the halogen lights on the ceiling went dead.

Their light had been like the midday sun, but that was replaced with utter darkness.

Within that, someone pushed me to the floor.

I reached out but she was no longer there. No, I couldn’t find anyone there. That Eastern European Queen was the one and only person who could see and move around in this thick darkness, so she was like a ruler of the night.

“Kh!!”

I heard a shout in the darkness and submachineguns roared blindly. The Echidna may have been trying to use the muzzle flashes to see, but it was still too late.

Amatsu Erika the Vampire tore through the darkness to approach her prey.

A dull sound exploded in the pitch black.

The muzzle flashes vanished and then I heard something hard hitting the floor.

“Oh...ah...?”

“ ... ”

The veil of darkness kept me from knowing what was happening. But that may have been for the best. Since she didn't have to worry about me seeing, Erika may have been able to briefly become that coldhearted queen once more.

With a deep mechanical noise, the halogen lights came back to life. It blinded me like I had just stepped out of a dark tunnel, but my eyes adjusted soon enough.

This was not the bug juice from before.

The snake woman's white skin was stained red with blood.

Both of the guns had fallen from her grasp. She was leaning against the railing while holding her stomach. Her face was pale and soaked with sweat, but she was smiling.

“...It doesn't really...matter.”

“ ... ”

“Have you forgotten? The simulator capable of predicting the Calamity, the book of prophecy used like Absolute Noah's scriptures, is inside my head. If I die, you lose all hope. No one – not one person – will be able to escape the Calamity. I may not be able to directly strike back at the gods...but the world they created and accepted will be razed and the black smoke will...blot out...heaven...”

That was as far as she got.

The Echidna wobbled and fell over the railing. The bright white skin, sweet milk tea hair, and snake lower body of her decadently beautiful body fell with the rainbow-glittering tail following after. She disappeared into the deep darkness below.

The light brown scales and the organ-like throbbing of the floors and walls receded. They returned to normal. However, the giant translucent bug hearts remained the same.

Even in the very end, she had not mentioned her dead sons and daughters.

She had not said she was on her way to join them. That may have been a glimpse of the resolve that had led her to remake herself into a simulator for her adorable children.

“Let’s leave.”

Our dad breathed a sigh and tossed aside the battered blue tarp before placing a hand on my shoulder.

“And go where?”

“That problem-filled world we call home.”

Absolute Noah was ruined. Sections all over had to have been destroyed to create barricades and during the meaningless rioting, but to reconstruct it, they needed the accurate Calamity data that had been lost with the Echidna. And if the Echidna had spent a long time replacing pieces of Absolute Noah with her giant bug pieces, then it might not even run without her. Could it even be remade into machine parts at this point?

More importantly, all this had happened. No one would agree to spend a long time closed up in this giant facility with these people.

They would scatter and everyone would face the end in their own way.

Was this how it should be?

Was there anything wrong with it?

I decided...

Part 2

“Absolute Noah is necessary. We need to rebuild it.”

“Absolute Noah is no longer necessary. Let’s go somewhere to wait out the end.”

[Support by] The Human Brain [DELTA brain]

First of all, computers like me were developed to support humans. The most common variety use a Von Neumann architecture managed by 0s and 1s, which is not exactly modeled after the human brain, but some experimental machines are attempting the linking structure of human synapses.

IT companies will commonly advertise their technology by showing off AI competitions or big data, but I do not think the human brain is always inferior. For one thing, it was humans who came up with the idea of computers and then actually built them. And I can estimate that the potential there is far greater than the people involved thought.

I am hoping that you do not limit your own possibilities.

Chapter 10

I bought a new smartphone.

I mention that to show that money was still being circulated. In other words, the world had not ended.

“Because American federal bankruptcy law applied, Wild@Hunt, known as the largest American online store, has begun settling its debts. The seven division that acted as its primary pillars are being sold to pay off those massive debts, and at the same time...”

“Good, it can stream video just fine.”

“Truth. Did you really have to buy it at an airport duty free store?”

Anastasia said that with a sigh. She must have already left her suitcase with the airline because she was only dragging around a carry-on bag far too compact for an overseas trip.

“I was using an old model with high specs, so you can’t actually find it at normal electronics shops. They’d just smile and recommend the latest model which comes with all sorts of sharing functions.”

“Japan is a nice country, but your mobile contracts are hopelessly complicated.”

At any rate, Anastasia and I sat on a leather sofa in a glass-covered lobby (which was a members-only deal with “royal” in the name).

“Wild@Hunt caused so much trouble, but it looks like they’re just moving to a new shell without changing much of anything on the inside.”

“Well, their business will never die as long as there’s a demand,” said Anastasia. “It isn’t just us net addicts who would scream if we learned Wild@Hunt had shut down. There are probably towns, cities, and even entire

countries that rely on them.”

The commotion had distracted everyone from the Techno Parade hacker festival, but the participants’ posts were all very excited. Because they got to be a part of a worldwide incident. They could enjoy pretty much anything, so there was no point in worrying about them.

But...

“Nothing is really over, is it?”

“No.”

According to my stepmom, they never found the Echidna after she fell over the railing. Absolute Noah was completely useless with so many important components replaced with bug parts and they had lost the planetary simulator (the Echidna’s brain) that had all the crucial data on the Calamity. The ark had lost its unifying force and the group was falling apart.

But that did not mean the Calamity was gone. Without the Echidna, we had no way of knowing when it would burst. But we knew the sickness was there, so symptoms would develop eventually.

At least we had managed to save the Banshee, the Sylpheed, and the others using the bird based on the Caladrius that the Echidna had prepared as a defense against the ticks.

“About all this.”

“Yeah?”

“Did the Echidna really do it all on her own? The people in Absolute Noah weren’t stupid. I feel like she would have needed support from elsewhere to hijack it on such a large scale.”

Something bothered me about the Echidna’s ideology.

The adorable children born between her and her beloved had been killed by the gods and heroes, so to strike back at the gods who normally did not appear, she had tried to create a global disaster. And she based it on the divine revelation to Noah before the flood.

But wait.

If she followed the story of Noah's Ark, would she really find Zeus, Hera, and the other Greek gods she wanted to attack? She seemed to be treating the concept of "the gods" too broadly. It wasn't just an issue of different people using the term differently. She used it like a container that encompassed everything each member of an organization thought of when they used the term.

In that case...

"...The Echidna might not have been working alone."

That baseless thought crossed my mind despite the minimal evidence.

"There might be a group of people who want to strike back at 'the gods'."

"In that case, this problem isn't over." Anastasia shrugged. "I mean, is the Calamity even a naturally-occurring thing? It might be an artificial thing this organization created to rattle the gods. We have to question everything now."

With Absolute Noah scattered, there would likely be another large shifting of power behind the scenes. People who had been held down by Absolute Noah might start rising to the surface.

At the same time, the Echidna's organization, which had tried to create extraordinary destruction and chaos with the ark, would likely try something else. Would they hijack something again, or would they do something themselves? I couldn't say, but I knew something would happen. And soon.

Many different interests would cross paths and the world enter a period of chaos. What weapon could I rely on during that?

That was obvious. The power to separate fact from fiction: data.

"Anastasia. I have high hopes for you."

"And I for you, Truth."

International Flight WQF-109 left the runway on schedule and I watched the airplane grow smaller from the glass-covered lobby.

"Satori."

My dad approached as if he had been waiting for just this moment. As always, he wore a messy shirt and slacks. He looked like a middle-aged office worker who let the little things slide. But what was that I had seen from him in Absolute Noah?

“Since we left the city to visit the airport, why not get something to eat at the mall? They seem to have some unusual restaurants there.”

“That’s fine, but I hope you’re going to call mom first. If she’s made lunch for us, this will escalate into a small war.”

My dad groaned at that. Our family had its issues, but I felt like this man let too much slide in the everyday things as well as the serious things.

We had ridden his car to the airport, so we made our way to the underground parking garage. The exposed concrete stood out more as we descended the slope and I got to the real topic at hand once there weren’t many people around.

“Dad.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have a power you can use to fight? Just like mom, Erika, and Ayumi do?”

“What do you think?”

He smiled a bit and asked a testing question while walking alongside me.

But he must not have really wanted me to think about it because he soon continued.

“If my brain really could rival a planetary simulator, I don’t think your first mom would ever have left me. I could have handled that more intelligently. Right?”

“...”

This was all a bluff.

He had fooled the Echidna who had manipulated the entire ark, replaced its components with her lab parts, and hijacked everything. Did he want to talk

about what happened back then in the same way?

“But dad.”

“Hm?”

“If you really were that skilled at deceit, I doubt you would have fought with mom like that. You wouldn’t have argued with her so seriously. You would have easily evaded it all.”

“If you say so,” he said with a bitter smile.

I had no idea what the truth was anymore. Neither version of him seemed to fit my dad.

But he added something else with bitterness in his voice.

“Hey, Satori.”

“Yes, dad?”

“...I wish we could have saved the Echidna.”

That had to be who he really was. These were the honest thoughts he could only reveal to me because I was his blood-related son.

So I replied with the same honesty.

“Yeah, so do I.”

Afterword

That was Volume 6 of Vampire/Zombie.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Instead of focusing on a specific Archenemy, I placed the focus on Satori, the protagonist, and Maxwell, the disaster environment simulator he built. So the battlefield was much more horror focused than before.

I also directly addressed the secret at the bottom of the dam that was left a mystery in Volume 1, so we finally entered Absolute Noah itself.

The issues with Satori's two moms were mostly addressed in Volume 3, but his father appeared as a major pillar of support in this one. Taori and Yurina were extraordinary in a physical sense, so I kept him more intellectual while still showing off his individuality. You see supercomputers and big data mentioned everywhere these days, but there must be a lot we still don't know about the human mind. By showing an intelligence different from Satori's computer-reliant variety, I hinted at a theme of "what is intelligence?" I just hope people and machines can find their own unique niches.

I give my thanks to the image illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, and Onodera-san. This was a horror novel that focused on the situations rather than the characters, but I think the roughs and illustrations help a lot to let the characters shine within that. Thank you very much yet again.

And I give my thanks to the readers. It is not that Satori is amazing. Maxwell, who Satori created, is amazing, so Satori is also amazing. That is a somewhat odd point to make, but how did you like it? It's not quite the same structure as Blood-Sign where the protagonist is amazing because he is the only person recognized by the biggest and baddest enemy, but I hope you could accept this

way of enjoying it.

And I will end this here.

Have we gotten used to the “location” of Kukyou City yet?

-Kamachi Kazuma

?

[Support by] A Circle Like an Uroboros [Delta Brain]

...That Archenemy slithered deep underground.

The walls and ceiling wriggled weakly around her. Scales colored the light brown of dried grass continually appeared and disappeared.

Outward discrimination against immortals was frowned upon, but how people actually felt about them was obvious enough from the public reaction to the Colosseum. Elves and Dwarves who looked just like humans were one thing, but someone with the lower body of a snake could not boldly move around in public. Or to be more accurate, she would never consider exposing herself to humans *while she was weakened*.

There was no one in this wide world she could comfortably reveal her weaknesses to.

That was like a symbol of the path she had walked.

Archenemy Echidna.

Charlotte Fregula.

She had used the chaos to escape Absolute Noah, slithered across the mountain, and entered the vast network of tunnels below the city. The Bright Cross did come in handy occasionally. She was using those tunnels to escape Kukyou City without letting anyone see her in her weakened state. Once she crossed the entire city to reach the ocean side, she could board a cargo ship moored at the harbor block and get a fresh start.

By regrouping with the organization.

This had been a failure, but if she reported on the details and thought of it as data to be used for next time, it was not that bad a thing. And this meant letting go of Absolute Noah, but losing the ark would still be a major blow to humanity. If they launched a second and third attack before humanity recovered, the stress within human society would skyrocket. The global depression from Wild@Hunt's collapse would seem like nothing compared to the ultimate moral hazard of the true Calamity.

The Echidna's brain was another piece of her lab. She used it for artificial life evolution experiments and it had grown to rival a giant planetary simulator. Like a *kodoku* jar, her brain was already refining a poison that would bring ruin to humanity.

(I swear...)

The Echidna pressed both her snake lower body and her beautiful upper body against the floor and grabbed at any bumps there to drag herself ever onward.

Even as her decadence reached its extremes and she was forced to crawl, the rainbow-colored light decorating her body and the force of will in her eyes remained as bright as ever.

(I swear I will get back at those gods who let the heroes kill my adorable children as trials and tests of strength...)

She only had to get back to the organization.

Once the idea in her head was realized, she could achieve her goal.

But before she could.

Something else arrived.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hm, hmm☆”

It came from the depths of the darkness.

The humming seemed far too out of place, but the Echidna, with her sweet milk tea hair plastered to her white cheek, understood what it meant to give away your location on a deadly battlefield.

Yes.

It meant you intended to execute your opponent with an overwhelming difference in power.

“ ... ”

A hopeless ending arrived far too suddenly. It was like a frog running into a snake as it hopped through the bushes or like that snake being snatched away by a hawk.

That ending wore blue armor.

It held a spear and shield that glittered with a gold light.

It showed no concern for the crawling serpent's circumstances. A heavenly ruler cared not whether it was a home or away game. They would stroll along like they owned the place.

This was an Archenemy, another immortal.

But what exactly was it?

“Who...are you?”

“Oh, come on now. Don't tell me you're surprised I showed up after you rang the doorbell so loudly.”

The Echidna had her hands full simply getting her ruinous egg back to the organization, so she was not armed with submachineguns or anything else. But even if she had brought out her lab components and prepared everything she needed, could she have defeated this figure in blue armor?

After all, this being had descended to the dry surface as if in response to an age of disaster.

“Valkyrie Karen is back!! I'm a specialist the gods use to eliminate people like you, so let's get that over with, shall we? ☆”

Translator's Notes and References

1. [↑](#) Anago refers to salt-water eels.